

How to grow peas

Peas are one of the earliest vegetables that can be harvested from the garden. The quick-growing vines of this annual legume produce pods containing four to ten seeds. Some varieties have smooth seeds and some have wrinkled seeds. The wrinkled seed varieties produce sweeter peas and are usually planted in the spring. The plants are frost hardy and best grown as a spring crop. Some may even be ready to pick by the end of May. Early peas can be harvested in 54 to 57 days. Main season peas can be picked at 60 to 72 days. Peas are easy to grow and a good source of nutrients. Peas are one of the oldest cultivated vegetables dating back 5,000 years.

Kinds of peas

All kinds of peas are best if picked immediately before cooking. Storage causes the sugars to convert to starches and lose flavor, sweetness and quality.

For **garden or English peas**, the pod is removed and peas are eaten. Pick peas when the pod has filled out and peas are noticeable through the pod.

With **snap peas**, the entire pea pod with peas inside are eaten fresh or cooked like snap beans. Peas are picked when peas inside are small and the pod is still tender. Seeds past their prime for fresh eating can be dried and later used for soups or stews. Allow the peas to remain on the vine until the pods are withered and brown. Harvest, shell and lay them out to dry for three weeks. Store in an airtight container with a lid.

With **sugar or snow peas**, the entire pea pod is eaten; peas inside

remain tiny. Pods are picked when green, flat and tender; yellowing indicates toughening and age. When picking peas, try not to damage the vines. It is best to cut the pods off the vine with pruners or scissors instead of pulling.

The basics

Plant peas in well-drained **soil** with some organic matter, such as compost or composted manure. Peas should be mulched with straw or bark once they have started to grow.

Make sure peas receive adequate amounts of **water**, especially when pods are forming. Usually one inch of rain (in your rain gauge) is sufficient. Water weekly, if you do not get that much rain.

Peas should not get too much nitrogen. **Fertilizer** touching pea seeds can cause problems. Fertilize following your soil test recommendation or apply four pounds of 5-20-20 fertilizer for every 100 square feet of soil. Mix one pound of fertilizer into the soil before planting. Apply the rest along the rows after planting.

Plant peas one to 1.5 inches deep and one inch apart in single or double rows. Space rows 12 to 18 inches apart. Thin plants to two to three inches between plants in rows, **or** plant double rows six inches apart with three feet between single or double rows of tall varieties.

Proper **care** ensures a good harvest for your pea plants. Dwarf and intermediate pea varieties are self-supporting. Taller varieties should be staked or trained on a fence for support. This includes sugar peas.



When to plant

Peas grow best in cool weather (60 to 75°F). Light frosts will not kill them. Plant as early as the ground can be worked, March 20 to May 15. The variety 'Wando' can be planted later since it withstands warmer weather better than other varieties. To lengthen the harvest period, plant early, mid-season and late varieties all at the same time. A fall crop can be planted July 15 for harvest in September, although it's usually not as successful as a spring crop because of the warmer weather and shortening days.

Staking

There are bush and vining types of peas. Dwarf or bush varieties are usually 18-24 inches tall and do not need staking nor take up much space. Tall or vining varieties need support and produce for a longer period.

Staking options: Train peas to climb

1. Use a section of farm fencing or chicken wire supported by metal fence posts. The wire should be 36 to 48 inches tall. Usually, sugar peas get the tallest.
2. Use branches 36 inches tall and push the large end into the ground.
3. Use stakes with sturdy string tied to make horizontal lines like a fence.
4. Train pea plants to grow up a pole pushed at least six inches into the ground.

Notes: