

Easy Peasy

By Lynn Sparks

Erie County Master Gardener



Most people like peas of some sort. You can choose garden/shelling peas or edible podded ones. All are high in fiber, protein, vitamins, and antioxidants—and low in fat. They are felt to fight cancer, be good for your heart, and support healthy blood sugar. If you don't think you like peas, you haven't tasted a just picked snap pea. They're almost like candy. It's worth trying to grow your own—and it's not that hard.

Peas are a cool season crop, meaning they can be one of the first ones planted in the spring. They can go in "as soon as the soil can be worked", but the ideal soil temperature for germination is around 60 degrees (range 45-75). This should be about 4-8 weeks before the last spring frost, which is around May 15 here. They prefer rich, well-drained soil. Depending on the variety you have chosen, you may need a trellis. Pea vines can range from 2.5' to 6' tall. The shorter, self-supporting ones are often "determinate," meaning they produce a large crop in a short period of time. The taller ones will keep producing as long as it is cool enough.

Seeds may be soaked in cool water for 1-2 hours before planting to increase their germination rate. Plant them about 1-2" deep, directly in the garden, and about 2" apart—or thin to 2" apart after they sprout. You can make double rows 6-8" apart with a central trellis, and these double rows should be 18" apart. Do not grow peas in the same ground as peas have been grown in for the last 4 years; they are prone to diseases that can live in the soil. Some seed varieties will be resistant to certain conditions; check the catalog.

Peas are in the legume family, meaning they “fix” nitrogen by pulling it from the air and putting it into the plant (and soil) with the help of bacteria and fungi that live on nodules on the plant’s roots. For best effect, you can buy a packet of inoculant and sprinkle it on your seeds to ensure that the proper bacteria are available to the plant. They do not require as much fertilizer as some garden crops. They like a little bit of bone meal and an average garden pH of 6.5-6.8. You can sow successive plantings every week or two to increase the harvest. If the last of July or early August is cool enough, you may even be able to plant a crop to harvest before a killing fall frost.

If you are growing edible podded peas (snow or snap), harvest them as the seeds begin to swell the pods for best sweetness and flavor. Ideally, pick right before cooking (if they even make it into the house) because the sugars start to turn to starch soon after being picked. Snap peas are the most productive, and in many people’s experience, the tastiest! (Plus, you don’t have to sit and shell them.) It’s easy peasy!

Planning on planting something new this year? The Erie County Master Gardener Volunteer annual Plant Sale will be held at the Erie County Fairgrounds on Saturday May 11, from 9AM to noon. There will be native plants, ornamentals, trees, annual vegetables, house plants, and much more. Proceeds fund our scholarship program. Come early for the best selection!