

Peas please

Edible gardening expert Rachel Knight explains all you need to know about growing sweet spring peas.

When I was a little girl I wouldn't eat any vegetables. My Mum insisted I eat a single pea. The next day I had to eat two, the following day three and so on. A few weeks later I was consuming a big spoonful of peas and still making my mum count them all out individually. By that stage I'd grown to like them and I'm glad she persisted in broadening my tastes.

Peas are a cool weather crop so you can often squeeze them into your garden before the tomatoes in spring or after you've pulled out your zucchinis in autumn. They need a minimum temperature of just 10°C to germinate reliably and can tolerate a relatively poor soil, preferring a neutral pH. They don't like the heat, humidity or strong winds.

Starting peas in pots protects them from pests. Mice and slugs are the main culprits. However peas do better if sown directly in the soil and sometimes 'sulk' after transplanting from pots. Sowing 20 peas into potting mix in a metre long piece of guttering avoids this, by minimising

root disturbance. Just dig a trench the same shape and size as the guttering and slide the seedlings into it when they're about 10cm high. Then it's time to sow some more seeds to make sure you'll have a succession of pods ready to eat.

Most kids love to eat peas fresh from the pod and will be a great help picking them – a job that might need doing daily during their peak. You can get purple and golden-podded peas which are definitely easier to spot among the foliage.

Peas need strong support as some varieties grow up to two metres tall and even so-called dwarf ones seem to scramble up to a metre high. They use their tendrils to twine around anything they encounter. I poke prunings from my fruit trees in around young peas to help them get started and keep tender shoots off the ground and away from slugs and snails. Most of us eat plenty of frozen peas and although they're delicious, fresh ones are even better. If you're lucky some of them may even make it into your kitchen. In my experience humans have a tendency to be the worst predators of peas in our gardens. I don't think my Mum would complain. More peas please!

Which green pea for me?

Shelling peas slide out of their pods with your thumb into a bowl with a satisfying rattle. I favour 'Wando Select', an English heirloom pea with dark green pods filled with seven or so peas.

Snow peas or 'mange tout' are eaten whole when the pods are still flat (before pea seeds start to form). 'Carouby' has beautiful purple flowers and pods that become fibrous less quickly than other varieties.

Sugar snap peas with round pods are like a shelling pea but tender enough to eat the fleshy pods with the peas still inside.

Exuberant **sweet peas** are inedible but I still find space for a few as I love their colour and fragrance.

