



Urban Harvest

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## Negotiating a Peas Plan

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The winter vegetable garden has many wonders—cabbage, kale, collards, broccoli, mustard and their kin in one bed; onions, garlic, multipliers, and chives in another; an abundance of lettuces, sorrels, endives and other salad greens in a third; fennel, carrots, dill, cilantro, and parsley in a fourth; and beets, spinach and chard in a fifth; but none of these make my mouth water quite like peas. Probably, that is because you can pick and eat them right off the vine, they are a sweet, protein crop that is cheaper than meat and better for us, and because no peas in the supermarket or restaurant are ever even close in flavor.

### Sugar Snaps

A Houston area gardener has a lot of choices in winter peas. There are four main types. The most popular are sugar snaps. Sugar snaps produce sweet edible pods with peas inside that size up and taste good. Since you get both edible pods and seeds off the same plant, you get much more food for your effort than you would if you grew other kinds. Sugar snaps are usually sautéed with onions or garlic and other veggies and served with a sauce on rice or pasta. But they taste good in salads too. I often eat them raw out of hand as a snack.

### English Peas

The most well-known of the winter peas are the so-called English peas. These are the type found frozen in boxes in the supermarket and they turn up in soups at Luby's. They are also called "shell peas" because you must remove the pods before you can eat them. It takes a lot more pea pods to make a meal of English peas than for sugar snaps, but the result can be exquisite. To be delicious, you must pick the pods when the peas are large enough to be worth eating, but before they get so large they lose their sugar and turn to starch. So you must grow enough so that to get a meal, you are not forced to pick peas that are too small. The best of this type is not actually English, but French, the delicious but small seeded *petit pois*.

### Snow Peas

Edible pod peas are another option. These are often called snow peas, sugar peas, or Chinese peas. They are cooked and eaten much like sugar snaps, but produce less food and protein than sugar snaps, because the seeds are tiny. On the other hand, the better varieties are much better tasting and tender than sugar snaps, so the gardener should give them serious consideration.

One of the advantages of the snow pea is that it can be planted much earlier in our area than others discussed above. All of these peas are extremely cold hardy. The leaves and stems are rarely damaged by a freeze unless it comes after a long period of warm weather. But the blossoms and

Pods are much more easily damaged by hard freezes. Since none of these peas grow well in hot weather, they can't be planted in most of our area before mid-October to mid-November. If they flower before freeze danger ends, much of the crop will be lost.

In the warmest parts of the area (inner city Houston south of downtown and within a mile of the Gulf or Bay), there is little danger of a bad freeze, so any of the peas can be planted in early November. In the coldest parts of the area (Woodlands, Conroe, Tomball, west of Highway 6, Austin County), these plants should not be flowering before late February, so plant in early January. Everywhere else, mid to late December is best.

### **Pea Shoot Vegetable**

There is an exception though, one variety of snow pea, Dwarf Gray Sugar, makes a very nutritious and delicious vegetable even if it doesn't flower or pod! What one does is cut the tender shoots off the tip of plants once they are over a foot high. Tips are cut at the point where the stem no longer cuts very easily. These tips are sautéed in onions or garlic for a wonderful vegetable high in protein and folic acid. Since it doesn't matter if the flowers get frosted, you can plant in early November even in the coldest parts of the area. If there is a warm winter, then the plants will eventually have delicious pods also. Dwarf Gray Sugar has beautiful purple flowers reminiscent of sweet peas.

### **Bush or Vine**

Peas come in two basic growth forms: vine and bush. Vines produce more per square foot and over a longer period, so they are definitely for those with limited space. They require trellising so vines spaced 4-8 inches apart can climb 5-7 feet. I use green coated fence mesh wired to metal U-posts (Home Depot) and put the trellis either in the center of a bed or across it. I also use five foot re-mesh tomato cages and have used string, netting and other materials. As long as the vine has something long enough to climb on it will do all right.

The main danger to vine peas is that blue northern winds can bend poorly attached vines in half, damage the stem, and severely hurt their production. So vines are best sheltered by windbreaks from the north. Plant vines on the northern side of the trellis, so that winds blow the vine into the trellis, not away from it. As well, keep rabbits and deer out of the garden with fencing.

The main advantage of bush peas is that if you have the space, you can plant a lot of them without the bother or cost of trellising. They may be the best choice for very windy areas. Also, they are in the ground fewer weeks, so they free up space sooner in the spring for something else. In fact, the need for garden space in March and April is the main reason I don't grow more peas than I do.

One way to overcome this problem is to set up your vine trellises with a plan in mind for the space in spring and summer. What I do is plant pole beans, long beans, or cucumbers in late March or April at the base of the pea vines that are producing. Then, as the pea vines die in April and May, I gently pull them out and the new plants take over the trellis.

### **Varieties**

There are many fine varieties of snow pea, sugar snap, English peas, petit pois, and pea shoot vegetable peas. If these choices aren't enough, you might look at winter beans. These are planted at the same time as the peas and in similar ways. Fava or Broad beans are the national legume of Portugal and Spain where they are eaten in soups and stews, or are prepared much like green limas

are prepared here. Garbanzo beans (or chick peas) are another option. Humus, three-bean salad, and falafel are just some of the possibilities. I don't know as much about growing these because they take up space in March and April that I need for other things. But if you have a lot of experience with either of these, please share what you know.

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