

Home/Garden

In search of the perfect pea

In some parts of the country peas get planted on St. Patrick's Day. I don't know if I'll manage that this year because the garden is still buried under three feet of crusty snow, but last fall I prepared one bed for the earliest spring planting. Early in April the peas will be in.

Now I just have to decide how to limit myself.

The Vermont Bean Seed Company alone offers 22 varieties of peas, including Tall Telephone, Little Marvel, Lacy Lady, Mammoth Melting Sugar and Sugar Snaps. There are early peas, heat-resistant peas, peas for freezing and edible podded peas for munching right off the vine.

Whether you like your peas to climb a fence or trellis, or prefer the shorter dwarf varieties that can hold themselves up if planted in a wide row or attach themselves to brush stuck in the row, there is a pea or two that is perfect for you and your garden.

All peas should be planted early in the season, because high temperatures will keep the plant from setting blossoms or the pods will not fill with plump peas. To lengthen the harvest, plant peas every ten days or so. You will also find that you can lengthen the season by planting varieties that mature at different times.

Lacy Lady is a fairly new pea variety that has very little foliage to hide the pea pods which are ready to

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Between The Rows

harvest in 55 days. Wando has been popular for years because it has good tolerance to heat. It matures in 68 days. The new Sugar Daddy snap pea is the first stringless edible podded snap pea, and it matures in 75 days.

If you like pea soup you might like to plant a row of Alaska peas which can be planted very early, harvested for eating fresh in 55 days, or allowed to dry on the vine and then stored in jars on your pantry shelf.

Since peas are a legume and can absorb nitrogen from the air, ordinary garden soil will produce a good crop. I prepare the pea bed in the fall by cultivating the soil, incorporating compost.

I rotate my garden beds and this year's peas will be planted where the tomatoes were last year. Next year I'll plant squash in that space. Rotating crops like this helps prevent a buildup of insects or disease organisms in the soil. Also, different

plants require different nutrients from the soil, so I'm not depleting the same elements year after year.

I do have childhood memories of being corralled on a summer afternoon to shell the peas for supper. I enjoy this task more now than I did then, because although the summer afternoons seem shorter now, I find it relaxing to open the pods and push those plump peas out into a cream-colored pottery bowl circled with pink and turquoise stripes. It gives me time to admire and enjoy the summer afternoon.

Despite such pleasure, I think my favorite pea is the edible podded sugar pea which I eat straight off the vine. I'm always happy to have good things to throw on the compost pile, but I also like to be able to eat most of what I grow — so I like being able to eat the pods as well as the peas. I plant the Sugar Snap which was introduced in 1979 and was awarded a gold medal by the All America Selec-

tions. It is dependable and delicious. It needs a fence or trellis because the vines grow to five feet or more.

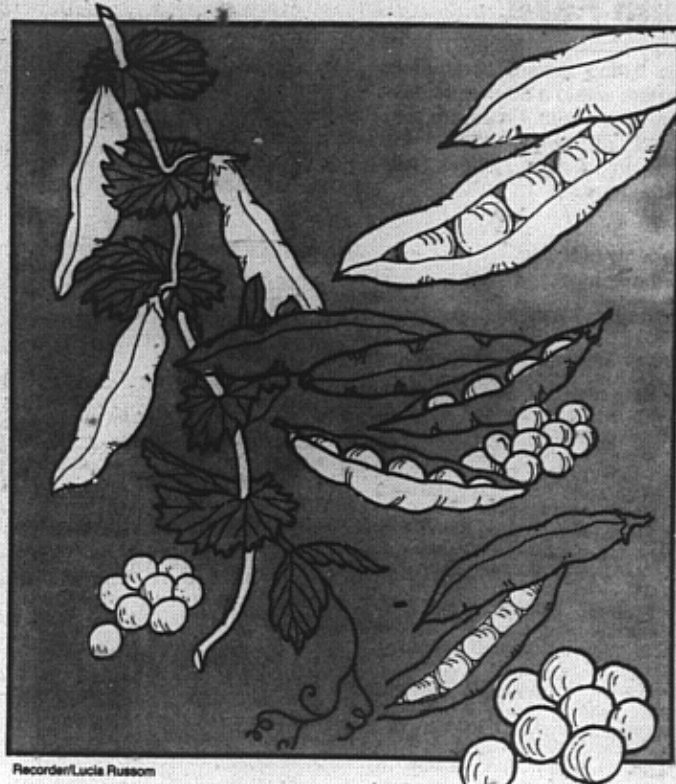
I also grow the Alaska pea, which I then dry and store on the pantry shelf.

Soup recipe

Last fall I learned a new method of making pea soup and this dish, which is such a good way of using a left-over ham bone, has gained a new popularity in my house.

A broth is made by simmering the ham bone, an onion, some celery, a carrot and a bay leaf until the meat falls away from the bone and the stock is full of flavor. Then I strain it, pick the bits of meat off the bone and return them to the broth. When it's time to get ready for dinner, I add some of the dry peas and a diced carrot or two to the broth and simmer until the peas are just soft, about 45 minutes. This soup is not the thick and heavy potage of my childhood, it's more delicate, but rich and flavorful, perfect for a winter lunch or supper.

Sources: Gurney Seed and Nursery Company, Yankton, SD 57079; Henry Field's Seed and Nursery Co., Shenandoah, IA 51602; Vermont Bean Seed Co., Garden Lane, Fair Haven, VT 05743.



Recorder/Lucie Russom