

## Peas, by Lawrence Davis-Hollander, ©2015

Like most folks, my first experience eating green peas was as a child. For some reason, my family ate peas in one form only: from a silver and black Le Sueur can. I hated them. In those days, you ate what you were served, so I ate them with displeasure.

For years, I avoided peas whenever I could. Being an optimist, I somehow lost my resignation when I moved to the country and planted a long double row of Tall Telephone peas and ate the fresh divine greenness of the legume family. There is nothing quite like eating homegrown peas. While they require a bit more work than other vegetables, if you have the garden space, they are well worth the effort.

### The Family

Peas (*Pisum sativum*) are a member of the Leguminosae or Fabaceae family, commonly known as Pea or Bean family. It is the third largest plant family and contains close to 20,000 species worldwide of economic and ornamental importance. The biggest subfamily in this family is the Faboideae, or Papilionoideae. Members of this group are easy to identify by their often showy five-part flowers that consist of a banner, keel and wings.

Common to most pea plants is the legume, the botanical name for the long flattened fruit that opens along a seam — the pea pod in this case. Leaves are generally compound, meaning a leaf is composed of a few too many leaflets. Legumes include food plants such as peas, cowpeas and soybeans, as well as shell and dry beans such as kidney beans, lima beans, lentils, chickpeas, peanuts and many others. A variety of forage and bee plants, such as clovers, alfalfa and vetch, are found in this family, too.

### History of the Pea

Several species of peas originated around 8,000 B.C. in the Middle East. The exact origin of our garden pea, *Pisum sativum*, is unclear. It is likely derived from a wild pea, *Pisum elatius*, whose native habitat hugs the Mediterranean from Spain to the Middle East.

Peas reached the Americas in early 17th century, being grown by 1629 in Jamestown of the Virginia Colony and Plymouth, now located in Massachusetts. According to the Rev. Francis Higginson, a minister in Colonial New England, there was a “store of peas (in Plymouth) ... as good as I ever eat in England.” There are numerous early mentions of “peasons” in the New World, beginning with cultivation in 1493 by Christopher Columbus on Isabela Island, and in 1535, mentioned by the French explorer Jacques Cartier as being grown by the indigenous peoples near Montreal. It is not certain that all these references refer to *Pisum sativum* or to other legumes such as beans. It is, however, certain that by 1779, peas were widely grown by native

tribes, including the Iroquois Federation, whose pea crop was destroyed by Gen. John Sullivan's campaign to remove the New York tribes during the American Revolution.

Philadelphian horticulturist Bernard McMahon lists both Green and White Rounceval, forms of wrinkle-seeded green peas, along with 15 dry peas in his 1806 broadside catalog. Thomas Jefferson loved peas and grew many types of dry peas; he organized a yearly contest focused on who among his neighbors could produce the first peas. The 1886 *Maule's Seed* catalogue, produced by the Wm. Henry Maule Co. in Philadelphia, lists two dozen green pea varieties, plus a couple of smooth-seeded peas the company claimed to be dual purpose for fresh and dry eating.

### **A Variety of Peas**

While the first types of green peas have long disappeared, quite a few heirloom varieties are still around. One of my favorites is Tall Telephone or Alderman, introduced in 1881, which can vigorously grow to 6 feet or more and produce an excellent crop of big pods containing eight-plus peas. They are longer season than many types and, unless planted quite early, may not perform well in climates that see higher temperatures early in the year. They are a great pea and well worth the extra effort of trellising.

Another historic variety is Champion of England, hard to find but available in the seed trade. This pea dates to the 1840s from a single pea found in a pod of Knight's Dwarf White Marrow by William Fairbeard. Vigorous climbers to 7 feet or more, the variety bears an excellent large pea with sweet taste and large pods containing seven to nine peas, and it is relatively late bearing.

Short or dwarf peas were among the original heirloom types, and the advantage to growing these varieties is that they tend to require less support than tall varieties — or no support at all. They are also a bit earlier bearing fruit. Dwarf peas are less than 18 inches, more or less self-supporting while short peas need some support.

The Alaska variety was developed in 1881 by Thomas Laxton in England (he named it Earliest of All) and was introduced to the United States in 1882. While considered a fresh eating pea, this variety is true to its heritage as it is smooth seeded and not particularly sweet, although it is quite early.

Laxton's Progress Number 9 is an improved version of a 19th-century variety with more disease resistance; it was introduced in the 1930s. The original Laxton's Progress was considered one of the best dwarf varieties, along with Little Marvel. Vines are 18 to 24 inches tall, relatively early with large pods yielding eight to nine peas each.

Another excellent pea with 18- to 30-inch vines is Little Marvel. First offered in 1908 in the United States by the James J.H. Gregory & Sons seed company of Marblehead, Massachusetts, it was developed in 1900 by Sutton & Sons of Reading, England. Little Marvel produces excellent sweet peas, with six to eight in a pod.

British Wonder is another short type with vines under 3 feet and large pods. It was probably developed in 1890 in England from the well-known American Wonder, and then introduced to the U.S. in 1904 by Burpee. While it is fairly rare, a number of small seed companies carry it.

While not as old as some of the aforementioned varieties, Wando still qualifies as an heirloom since it was introduced in 1943, a cross of two heirloom varieties by the South Carolina Vegetable Breeding Lab. While it is an excellent pea for the North, its great advantage is its excellent heat tolerance, which quickly made it popular in the South. Vines are 20 to 30 inches tall, with good yields of seven to eight medium-sized and delicious peas.

Last and least in size is Tom Thumb, which is very much a dwarf as it measures less than 1 foot in height — typically 8 to 9 inches. While everything about this pea is small, it actually yields fairly well and early. It is recommended today mainly for planting in containers. In the 19th century, it was suggested it would make a nice edging for a walk. It was introduced in 1854 by D. Landreth Seed Co., which is still in operation today.

No matter the variety selected, these heirloom peas are a wonderful addition to your garden plot, and a wondrous addition to your dinner menu.