

EASY GARDENING: Southern Peas

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Southern peas (*Vigna unguiculata*) are hot-weather legumes native to Africa and are grown during the summer. They are not true peas (*Pisum sativum*), which are cool-season plants. Southern peas are more closely related to beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris*), which are grown during the spring and fall. Southern peas are easy to grow, very productive, and very nutritious. They come in many varieties and colors, including both standard types and plump ones crowded into their pods, known as crowders. You can purchase black-eyed peas dried or canned, but no pea holds a candle to fresh, shelled ones from the garden. Southern peas are often eaten on New Year's Day throughout the South for good luck in the coming year. Cowpeas, field peas, black-eyed peas, purple hull peas, and crowder peas are all different names referring to Southern peas.

VARIETIES

Black-eyed

- ▶ California #5
- ▶ California #46

Cream

- ▶ Lady Finger
- ▶ Texas Cream #40
- ▶ Mississippi Cream
- ▶ Zipper Cream (crowder)
- ▶ Texas Cream #8

Crowder

- ▶ Black Crowder
- ▶ Mississippi Silver Skin
- ▶ Brown Crowder
- ▶ Zipper Cream
- ▶ Knuckle

Purple Hull

- ▶ Knuckle (crowder)
- ▶ Texas Pinkeye
- ▶ Mississippi Pinkeye
- ▶ Top Pick
- ▶ Quick Pick

Other

- ▶ Ozark Razorback
- ▶ Yard Long Beans

SOIL PREPARATION

Before planting Southern peas, remove all weeds and trash from the planting area. Then till the soil 8 to 10 inches deep and rake it several times to break up the large clods. It is best to work the garden soil only when it is dry enough to not stick to garden tools. Southern peas are not terribly picky about soil types but should be planted in areas that drain well.

PLANTING

Southern peas are a warm-season crop that cannot tolerate frosts, freezes, or even cool temperatures. They thrive on heat and full sun and should be planted well after the last frost. This is generally March in the southern half of Texas and April or later in the northern half of the state. A second crop can be planted as late as July. Southern peas are easily planted from seed. Create raised rows about 4 to 6 inches high and 16 to 24 inches wide. Multiple rows should be around 36 inches apart. Open a shallow trench 1½ inches deep with the corner of a hoe or a stick. Drop the seeds several inches apart to ensure a good stand. Cover lightly with loose soil using a hoe or garden rake. Once the seedlings are established and about 3 to 4 inches tall, thin them to 6 to 8 inches apart.



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FERTILIZING

Incorporate 1 pound of a complete garden fertilizer (13-13-13, 10-20-10, etc.) per 100 square feet of bed or every 35 feet of row. As legumes, peas do not need side-dressing with additional fertilizer. The ideal soil pH for growing Southern peas is 6.0 to 7.0. As a general rule, black-eyed peas tend to be more tolerant of alkaline soils.

WATERING

Southern peas are fairly drought-tolerant. Either pre-irrigate or water daily until they sprout and then water the plants about once a week during dry weather.

CARE DURING THE SEASON

Southern peas are easy to grow and with the exception of “yard long beans” do not need trellising. Keep them weed free by mulching with clean hay or straw, hoeing, or hand pulling.

INSECTS

The most frequently encountered insect problem on Southern peas is aphids, which can be controlled with an appropriately labeled insecticide as needed following all label directions. Southern pea blossoms attract myriad pollinating insects including bees and wasps, so only apply insecticides when they aren’t active. To avoid burning the plants when using oil-based insecticides, apply in the evening only.

DISEASES

Southern peas can occasionally be affected by root/stem rot which is best controlled by providing good drainage and not overwatering them. Leaf spot is also an occasional problem best avoided by using drip or furrow irrigation instead of overhead sprinkling.

HARVESTING

Depending on the variety, Southern peas are generally ready to pick 55 to 75 days from planting the seed. Pick fresh peas when the pods change from green to cream, yellowish, lavender, reddish, or purple, depending on the variety, and when the peas are plump inside. Be sure to pick them before they turn brown and dry out. The peas should pop out easily when you press on the pod seam with your thumb. Peas picked too green are much more difficult, if not impossible, to shell. Small, thin, undeveloped peas are sometimes picked and cooked as “snaps” with the shelled peas.



STORING

At room temperature, Southern peas in the shell will last about a day in a basket covered with a cloth. As long as they aren’t wet, they can be kept in the refrigerator in the shell for a few days in plastic bags. Shelled peas can be kept refrigerated in plastic bags or containers for up to a week. They can be shelled and frozen for up to several years. Peas picked after they have dried, then shelled, can be stored in sealed containers and cooked and eaten during the winter or stored in the freezer to plant for next year’s crop.

SERVING

Like all legumes, fresh-cooked peas add fiber and protein to meals and should be consumed often. To cook, cut salt pork, bacon, or tasso (all optional) into bite-size pieces and place in a large pot. Some add onions and peppers as well. Sauté over medium heat for 5-10 minutes. Add a quart of water or enough to cover the peas and bring to nearly a boil. Add the peas and season with seasoned salt and black pepper, Cajun seasoning, or your choice. Cook over low heat for at least 40 minutes or until the peas are tender. They will taste even better if you put a lid on the pot and let them sit for 20 minutes before eating. Serve separately, over rice, or mixed with rice (*Hoppin’ John*).

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More Easy Gardening publications on producing other vegetables can be found on the Aggie Horticulture website (aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu) under “Vegetable Resources.”
