

## SUGAR SNAP PEAS



Peas belong to the plant family known as legumes, which produce pods with enclosed seeds. Peas are protein-rich, low fat, nutritional additions to almost any meal, and peas are certainly no exception. In fact only lima beans are a better vegetable source of protein than peas.

Peas take so well to freezing that, only about 5 percent of the nation's pea crop is currently sold in the fresh market state. Most of the pea crop is now sold canned, frozen, and to a much lesser degree, dried. Frozen peas retain their color, flavor and texture much better than canned peas, but most agree that neither compares to fresh peas right out of the pod.

Archaeologists have found peas in ancient Egyptian tombs. The ancient Greeks and Romans ate dried peas. In fact, Europeans ate only dried peas until the Italian Renaissance, when the Italians developed *piselli novelli*, a type of pea eaten unripe and fresh. Fresh peas were commonly served during the Lenten season in France and England as early as the 16th century. Edible pod peas, also called *mangetout* (eat-all) were first developed by the Dutch and English in the early 17th century. Sugar snap peas, which are a cross between English and snow peas, were probably developed in the late 17th century, but they did not become commonly available until the 1970s.

If you enjoy eating fresh peas but aren't crazy about the idea of picking and shelling bushels of pea pods, then sugar snap peas may be the perfect vegetable for you. With Sugar Snap Peas you get to eat the entire pod with the peas nestled inside. The pods are juicy, crisp, sweet, and crunchy, and in the opinion of most, are best when enjoyed fresh.

In addition to the pea pods, some enjoy eating the flower blossoms and leafy plant tips or pea shoots. Just be sure that you don't attempt to eat any portion of any variety of "sweet pea." These are grown as ornamental flowers and are not edible.

Peas are a good low calorie source of protein. A 100-calorie serving of peas (about  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup) contains more protein than a whole egg or a tablespoon of peanut butter and has less than one gram of fat and no cholesterol.

Sugar snap peas are about the easiest vegetable to buy. Just buy them fresh, keep them cold, and eat them soon. The sugar, in snap peas, converts to starch the way it does in corn, and keeping them cold slows the sugar conversion down. Half of their sugar content will convert to starch within six hours if they are kept at room temperature. Low temperatures also preserve their texture and nutrient content. Look for pods that are firm, have glossy pods with a slightly velvety feel, filled to appear almost bursting, and peas should not rattle loosely in the pod. Pods should not be dull, yellowed, or heavily speckled.

Snap peas have an interesting history, some heirloom varieties have been around for centuries, but they never gained popularity among growers. The snap peas we have today were developed in the late sixties by Calvin Lamborn. His assignment was to get something with the sweetness of fresh peas without having to shell them. By crossing shelling peas with snow peas (a.k.a. sugar peas or Chinese peas), Dr. Lamborn developed a sweet pea with an edible pod—Sugar Snap Peas. Now, nearly 30 years later, there are several varieties of snap peas out there. In supermarkets you might find a stringless variety that can truly be tossed into salads or cooked without any fuss.

Green peas do not require the long cooking times that are required by dried legumes such as split peas and pinto beans. Thus, they are about the easiest vegetable to prepare, about the only thing to watch out for is overcooking them. Part of the pleasure of eating sugar snap peas is the *crunch*. Cook them more than two or three minutes, and snap peas get soft and lose flavor.

Peas are one of the oldest cultivated vegetables. Originally the tender tops of the plants were cooked along with the pea pods. Today we have shelling, snap, snow and sugar snap pea varieties. Sugar snap peas have edible pods; a cross between Snow Peas and English Green Peas, these crunchy, sweet, succulent pods are usually eaten raw in their entirety. The peas inside are fully developed, plump, round, and delicious.

During the Middle Ages, dried peas became a staple food of the European peasants. In their dried form, peas had the capability of long storage throughout the winter months. They were inexpensive and plentiful and made a filling wholesome meal the poor could afford. By the 13th century peas were a common food in France.

Peas were probably among the first vegetables to be canned by a company that became the household name that remains familiar today. The Campbell Soup Company began canning peas in 1870. Frozen vegetables appearing in the 1920s and 1930s provided a distinct advantage for peas: they could be harvested and frozen almost immediately before their sugars turned to starch, a process that begins within hours of harvesting. People who did not grow their own peas or who lived a great distance from a farm could enjoy the fresh, sweet flavor of frozen peas.

More than 1,000 varieties of peas are in existence today, (some producing green peas, some yellow). Countries like France, China, Denmark, and Russia lead in the production of dried peas, with the U.S., England, Hungary, and India mainly producing fresh peas.

Because peas can be challenging to keep on the fork, upscale restaurants rarely serve them in an effort to avoid unprecedented breaches of etiquette that may occur when diners attempt to chase peas around their plates or catch one that rolls off the fork and onto the table.

Gregor Mendel, an Austrian monk, is credited for his scientific contribution to the basics of genetics by the studies he conducted on how pea plants reproduced. During his experiments in the monastery in the 1860s, he developed standard laws that became fundamental to genetic inheritance.

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