

## **Peas and Mint a Perfect Pair in Your Kitchen and Garden**

By Barbara Damrosch

Undemanding in the garden, peas and mint will command attention in the kitchen. Learn how to grow mint and peas, and then invite them to your table by trying these fresh spring pea recipes and mint recipes.

Abundant in the garden in early summer, peas and mint are delicious companions in recipes.

In Colonial times, “peas by the king’s birthday” (that would be King George III’s birthday, on June 4) was considered the mark of a good gardener. Indeed, an early pea harvest is a worthy goal. Tender, fresh spring peas represent the start of the fruiting season after a diet of winter roots. Northern gardeners can hope to celebrate it with fireworks on July 4, and the date advances accordingly as you move south.

I’m talking about ordinary garden peas, also referred to as “green peas,” or “English peas” if you must. Much as I love the edible pod types, such as snow peas or sugar snaps, there’s nothing quite like zipping open a newly filled pod and popping that luscious little green row into your mouth. I snack on them raw, standing right in the garden, and then steam and butter them for dinner. After a while, I like to vary their use. When looking around for a worthy companion, I found that mint is a great choice because it’s abundant in early summer, too. Many of the dishes I make pair peas and mint.

### **Grow Fresh Spring Peas**

To get early peas, you need to sow them as soon as the soil can be worked in spring. Because wet spring soil can be impossible to work, it pays to prepare a compost-enriched bed with pre-formed furrows in fall. That way, you can just drop in the peas, cover them with about an inch of soil, water lightly, and up they’ll come.

Peas will need support unless they’re short-vine bush types. In our garden, we make two parallel furrows, between which we erect a trellis made of wood or metal pipes covered with some form of netting the peas can climb. We’ve used netting made of nylon, plastic mesh, and even plain old chicken wire. All of them work fine.

Both weeding and thinning can damage a pea plant's root system. Be sure to space the seeds carefully, 1 to 2 inches apart, so you needn't thin the plants later. Mulching with straw is best for controlling weeds, but grass clippings can also make good mulch for peas — just don't apply the clippings too thickly all at once, or they'll smell rotten and sour as they break down. The clippings will thin out as they dry, so just add a bit more every time you mow your lush, green summer lawn.

Peas need consistent moisture, especially when pods are forming, so irrigate them when it doesn't rain.

### **Harvesting Your Pea Crop**

Keep a close watch on the pods to pounce when the peas are ripe because they'll have only one day of perfect sweetness, maybe two. The pods will be fat and rounded, and the skin will still be smooth. Make it a habit to pick your pea crop every day because peas become starchy and not worth eating when the pods are pale and rough. Picking regularly also encourages the plants to form more pods.

After the vines stop producing, pull them out and plant a different vegetable in the bed. Later, you may sow another pea crop for fall. We sow ours in mid-July, but wait a month or so if your summers are long and hot.

'Premium' is an early variety that's done well for us, followed by 'Maxigolt,' 'Maestro,' and the wonderful old heirloom 'Lincoln.'

Always have some peas you can toss into a dish. They freeze well after a quick blanch in boiling water, but I use them in everything while they're coming in from the garden daily — in stir-fries, salads, soups, omelets, quiches, vegetable medleys, and stirred into the meat layer of a shepherd's pie. Puréed, they make a gorgeous green puddle in which to set a piece of white fish — a puddle made all the more appetizing when spiked with mint.

### **How to Grow Mint**

Having a little patch of mint to go with your peas is a fine thing, but a little patch is not on mint's agenda. Though a moist site suits it best — our mint fills an irrigation ditch — it will happily colonize a bed with average moisture as well. If you don't have an out-of-the-way spot for it, you'll need to grow it in a pot sunk up to its rim in soil, with some sort of mesh in the bottom to prevent the plant's aggressive roots from escaping. Cut as much as you like for mojitos, juleps, or

iced tea, and it will quickly regrow. For hot mint tea in winter, pick and dry some in summer just before the plant blooms, when the essential oils are strongest.

### **Spearmint or Peppermint**

The most popular mints are spearmint and peppermint, and people tend to prefer one or the other. Spearmint is named for its pointed leaves, but both mints can have a round or more elongated shape. Peppermint, which is a cross between spearmint and an aquatic species, has a sharper, more pronounced flavor, as its name suggests. Find some of both to nibble and compare, or just consider which you like better: Peppermint Patties or spearmint gum.

Simply because our mint ditch is at a distance, I like to keep sprigs on my windowsill in a tall glass of water. The mint stems then start to fill the glass with white roots, extending the leaves' usefulness. (This is also the way to propagate mint: by planting a rooted sprig in a pot of soil.) In addition to steeping mint in teas, I snip it into salads, syrups, meat dishes, and casseroles. Later in the growing season, I'll mix it with yogurt and sliced cucumbers or fruit. But right now, could anything be finer than chopped fresh mint added to a bowl of fresh, buttered, spring peas?

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