



By Peggy Crum, MA, RD, Health4U Nutritionist

Gardeners are rewarded for selling their seeds early, starting with peas. Peas are a cool season crop. As such, peas do best when planted ridiculously early. No need to start the seeds indoors. Peas prefer to be planted directly in the cool soil 4 to 6 weeks before the last frost date. In Ingham County (USDA zone 5b), peas are best planted by late March or early April.

My father was one of those gardeners, guided by the Farmers' Almanac and knowledge gained from years of experience. By the warm days of June, my brother and I would sit on the back-porch swing with peas by the bucketsful needing to be shucked. Each pod held a surprise as we competed for the most peas-in-a-pod or the biggest pea or the roundest pod. Grandpa would stop by for some storytelling and help himself to a handful of freshly-shucked peas. Our bowls didn't fill up quickly but snacking on fresh peas was irresistibly delicious.

Shoppers may be particularly perplexed by fresh peas in the produce section. Labeled "sweet peas," they're not so sweet by the time we buy them and get them home, even if we shuck and cook them immediately. The problem is the sugars that provide peas' memorably-sweet goodness turn to starch quickly. Three ways to overcome this conundrum and capture the natural sweetness of peas:

- Pick them yourself and chill right away. Shuck and cook them within 24 hours.
- Buy them directly from the farmers market or farm stand. The freshest peas will look shiny and firm with pods that squeak when rubbed together. Pass them up if the pods are dull, yellowing, or large and crowded with peas.
- Pick up a bag of peas from your supermarket's frozen foods section. While you won't have fun shucking them, they'll likely taste fresher than fresh. A good bargain, too. Choose petite peas (sweet with creamy texture) or regular peas (mildly sweet and starchier). Either kind thaws quickly and can be added directly to any dish including salads.

RECIPE for health

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featured food:

SWEET PEAS

Spring Pea Crostini

By Corporate Chef Kurt Kwiatkowski, Residential Dining Services

Makes 9 slices

- 2¼ c. frozen peas
- 1 loaf French bread
- 4 T. olive oil, divided
- 1 clove of garlic
- ½ c. fresh parsley
- ¼ c. fresh cilantro
- 1 jalapeno pepper, deveined and deseeded
- ½ c. lightly roasted walnuts
- 1 t. kosher salt
- ½ t. black pepper
- Zest from ½ lemon
- Juice from ½ lemon
- 3 T. ricotta cheese

Preheat oven to 300°F.

Place peas in a small pot and cover with water. Put the pot over medium heat and let warm without boiling for about 2-3 minutes. Set aside ¼ cup of peas.

Cut bread into ½-inch thick slices and brush with 2 T. olive oil. Place in preheated oven to lightly toast, about 5-7 minutes. Remove from oven and set aside.

Pulse walnuts in food processor until well-ground. Add remainder of the peas (all but reserved ¼ cup), 2 T. olive oil, garlic, parsley, cilantro, jalapeno pepper, salt, and black pepper; blend until smooth. Add lemon zest and lemon juice; pulse once or twice. Taste and adjust seasoning as needed.

Spoon a couple of tablespoons of the pea mixture onto each piece of toast; spread around. Top with a few of the reserved whole peas and 1 t. ricotta cheese. Serve and enjoy!