

Pisum sativum

[Synonyms : *Pisum arvense*, *Pisum commune*, *Pisum humile*, *Pisum sativum* var. *arvense*, *Pisum sativum* var. *humile*, *Pisum sativum* var. *macrocarpon*, *Pisum vulgare*]

PEA is a climbing annual. Probably native from the Mediterranean to Iran it has small pea-like, white or coloured flowers.

It is also known as *Alverja* (Spanish), *Ärt* (Swedish), *Ärter* (Swedish), *Arveja* (Spanish), *Bāzillah* (Arabic), *Bola-kadala* (Singhalese), Common pea, *Erbse* (German), Field pea, Garden pea, *Garten Erbse* (German), Green pea, *Guisante* (Spanish), *Herne* (Finnish), *Hrách polní* (Czech), *Hrach roľný* (Slovak), *Hrách setý* (Czech), *Hrach siaty* (Slovak), *Hum-mus* (Arabic), *Kachang puteh* (Malay), *Mattar* (Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi), *Mazăre* (Rumanian), *Minji* (Kikuyu), *Mokhud-faranji* (Persian), Mummy pea, *Pairu* (Tamil), *Patanlu* (Telugu), *Pattani* (Malayalam, Tamil), *Petit pois* (French), *Pisello* (Italian), *Pizelli* (Maltese), *Pizo ĝardena* (Esperanto), *Pois* (French), *Pois verts* (French), *Pysen* (Welsh), *Satila* (Sanskrit), *Tseng tau* (Chinese), and *Vatana* (Marathi); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of respect.

If the oblong green fruit pods are allowed to mature and dry they develop a spring-like tension which suddenly twists the valves apart and scatters the enclosed seeds.

Sativum means ‘cultivated’.

Old English records refer to the plant as ‘pease’. *Petit pois* is the name given to small-seeded varieties which are considered by many to produce peas with the best flavour.

The earliest peas to be found in archaeological digs are probably those in the Spirit Caves on the Burma (Myanmar) and Thailand borders. These remains have been carbon-dated to 9750 BC. Archaeologists’ finds in north-western Iraq (Jarmo) are about 2000 years later. Peas were being cultivated in Mycenae by 1500 BC. The ancient Greeks in Athens viewed hot pea soup as the equivalent of modern ‘fast food’ (both they and the Romans when attending their theatres took a light refreshment of boiled peas to feast on during intervals). Finds have also shown in other parts of Europe that at least the Stone Age Hungarians and the Swiss in the Lake Villages at Robenhausen included peas in their diet too. It is thought likely however that peas were eaten dried, not fresh as is usual today. Sites of the Bronze Age period (1900-500 BC) in France and northern Greece have revealed pea remains, and in Britain an Iron Age (500-51 BC) dig at Glastonbury has revealed the oldest known pea in that Country. Although well-known to the ancient Greeks and the Romans authorities still seem to disagree strikingly on whether peas were familiar to the ancient Egyptians or the Hebrews. Some contend there are no records to support their use in the Middle East and others suggest that peas were not only a standby for these cultures but also that when Roman soldiers were in these regions they supplemented military rations with peas harvested from the surrounding countryside. Peas were part of the diet on the Indian sub-continent and it was from there that they were also introduced to China.

In western Europe in the 9th Century Charlemagne (747-814), who was king of the Franks and Christian emperor of the West, is yet again credited with encouraging the monasteries to cultivate peas as much as any of the other plants he promoted. Lands controlled by the Franks also saw the application of stringent punishments if peas were stolen or damaged

in the pea fields as, apart from their use fresh, peas were also dried as famine food. In the following centuries peas became a popular food during periods of religious fasting, not least in Lent (on both sides of the Channel). [At this point it is interesting to note that peas, long a familiar food among the poor in France, seem only to have started to gain a following in the British Isles from about the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066 – despite archaeological finds that show peas must have been growing there for centuries by then.]

The Italian Renaissance period saw the development of the tiny peas (known as *piselli novelli*) and from these the *petit pois*. *Petit pois* were brought to the French court of Louis XIV (1638-1715) in January 1660 and during the Sun King's reign they were an obsession with the French aristocracy in the same way that particular foods (or their method of preparation) can often be fashionable today.

Some authorities claim that pea was introduced to North America by Columbus ((1451-1506), the Genoese explorer, when he planted some on Isabella Island in 1493. It seems that North American Indian tribes took to this new vegetable and began to cultivate it themselves. Records show that they came to be included in the diet of the Tohono O'Odham, Cherokee, Okanagan-Colville and some of the Navajo Indian tribes. Perhaps the speed of their progression through the Continent at that time provides the most striking evidence of their acceptability. They were to be seen among Indian crops in far distant places on the mainland one hundred years after their introduction, the most reliable sightings of which must include Florida in 1602 and New England in 1614. Certainly the American revolutionary soldier and statesman, John Sullivan (1740-1795) destroyed some Indian pea crops when attacking Iroquois in 1779 in western New York. 1801 saw the appointment of Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) as the 3rd President of the USA and one of his favourite vegetables is said to have been the pea. He grew thirty varieties on his Virginia estate.

For biologists the garden pea is extremely important. Those growing in the garden of an Augustinian monastery at Brünn in eastern Germany were the focus of attention for the Austrian abbot, Gregor Johann Mendel (1822-1884) in his research into genetic laws (especially the work he carried out in 1865).

In Britain the pea is associated with various old sayings and superstitions and from these one gathers that

if the thorns hang a drop

on 2nd February (Candlemas Day) or 14th February (St. Valentine's Day) a good pea harvest will be assured. There were also those who believed that peas should be sown with a waning moon (preferably on 'David and Chad', 1st and 2nd March) and in Scotland many were sure that peas should not be sown until the first swallow had appeared.

Peas were also used in England as love charms. The first man to come through the kitchen door after a girl had surreptitiously placed a pod of nine peas (considered lucky) over its lintel would become her lover – and slight variations on this custom were enacted in different parts of the Country. One custom or superstition with medical overtones was the belief that if you touched a wart with a pea (then wrapped the pea in paper and buried it) the wart would disappear as the pea decayed.

In some areas in northern England, especially in the old mining districts, it seems that it has long been traditional to eat a dried black or brown type of pea steeped in salt and vinegar or boiled in molasses on the fifth Sunday in Lent, Passion Sunday or what is locally known as Carling or Care Sunday. This pea concoction only receives eulogies from enthusiasts. Apparently it does not have any taste reminiscent of peas and is normally fed to pigeons.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616), the well-known English playwright and poet, referred to peas in several of his plays. In *Love's Labour's Lost* Biron declares

This fellow picks up wit, as pigeons peas,
And utters it again when God doth please.

Then in Part 2 of *Henry IV* Hostess Quickly bids farewell to Falstaff with
..... fare thee well; I have known thee these twenty-nine
years, come peascod-time; but an honest, and truer-hearted man, -
.....

Peas are at their best when young and freshly picked. Immediately they are harvested their sugar begins to turn to starch. Certain varieties of peas are grown especially to be processed as Split peas. These are harvested when mature and the peas are stripped of their skins mechanically then split in two, dried and sometimes polished. Leaves and young shoots can also be eaten.

Its indigestible qualities are not forgotten in history. Although there are those who subscribe to the story that John Lackland (1167-1216) King of England from 1199, died after eating a subsequently suspect dish of pears (*Pyrus*) there are others who like to believe apparently that the culprit was an excess of peas – or unripe peaches (*Prunus persica*), or lampreys or ale doctored with toad's blood. Then roughly five centuries later on the other side of the Channel Louis XIV's doctor recorded his patient's bouts of indigestion brought on after gorging on peas.

Today the cosmetics industry uses concentrated pea juice in some preparations. It is the birthday flower for 17th February.