Southern peas thrive in summer gardens

Growing southern peas in the vegetable garden is a great Southern tradition. Southern peas are known as “cowpeas”, “field peas”, “blackeyes”, “crowders” or just peas.

Varieties are called crowders if the seeds are spaced so closely that the seed ends are pressed against each other. Colorless varieties are called creams. The purple hull group includes varieties with some purple coloring on their pods.

Southern peas are related to beans, soybeans and English peas, which all have one thing in common--their unusual ability to grab fertilizer out of thin air.

That’s right. They’re able to take the nitrogen in the atmosphere and make it into fertilizer. Because of this, they can be grown on the poorest of soils.

Since they make some of their own, they don’t require much added fertilizer. If your soil is reasonably fertile, you might not need to use fertilizer, at least for the first time on new ground.

Southern peas grow on a variety of soils but grow best in soils with a pH between 5.5 and 6.5. Avoid planting peas in highly fertile soil. An excessive nitrogen level stimulates vine growth and prolongs the period to harvest.

They like warm weather and produce satisfactorily under hot conditions. They can be planted all summer long, April through August, in North Florida.

Southern pea varieties recommended for Florida gardens include black-eye, Mississippi Silver, Texas Cream 40, Zipper Cream and Purplehull.

A number of pests love southern peas. Common insect pests are leaf-feeding worms, leaf-footed and stink bugs, aphids, thrips and spidermites. One significant pest is the cowpea curculio. This insect probes the pods and lays eggs in the developing seeds. The growing curculio grub will eventually eat the infested seed.
Old-time gardeners referred to these peas as "stung." They wrongly thought they’d been stung by wasps. Folks would pick these peas out by hand and discard them before cooking.

Wasps do congregate around southern peas, but they aren't there to sting the pods. They’re gathering the nectar secreted by nectaries at the base of the pods.

Southern peas can be harvested at different stages of maturity. Most gardeners pick them at the mature-green stage. This is when the pods are completely filled out, but before they become dry and hard.

If you grow a lot of peas, you may want to take them somewhere to be shelled. Many farmers markets or roadside marketers have shellers that can make quick work of this chore. In a few minutes, they can shell what would take you several hours.

You can also harvest Southern peas when they’re fully mature, dry and hard. In this state, they'll last much longer.

In either case, mature-green or dry, you have to refrigerate them, because if any cowpea curculio larvae are in there, they’ll keep feeding on the peas, reproduce and eventually destroy them all.

Southern peas are a great vegetable to grow, especially for first-time gardeners. The relatively large seeds are easy to handle and plant. They require very little fertilizer. And they grow well, even during the hottest part of the year.

You can control curculios with timely insecticide applications. Or you can always pick out the "stung" seeds after harvest. Contact your local Extension Office for more information on how to control pests on vegetable crops.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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