

Southern Pea (Cowpea, Field Pea) Growing Guide

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Vigna unguiculata

This vegetable seems to have a different name in each section of the country. Southern peas are also called cowpeas, field peas, crowder peas, and black-eyed peas. Several varieties have historically been cultivated in Africa, and they were transported to the Americas via the transatlantic slave trade, hence a new term, African Peas. By whatever name you call them, they're an old favorite in the South and can be grown where both days and nights are warm for a period of 60-90 days.

How to Grow: Sow seed 1 in. deep, 2 in. apart in rows 3-6 ft. apart, thinning to 4 in. apart. Vining varieties are very vigorous and drought resistant, but they should be given extra room, or trellised, or planted so they can climb stalks of dent corn. Southern peas have cultural requirements similar to beans. They need warmer soil, so wait until 3-4 weeks after last frost to plant. Need full sun and a warm growing season. For best results provide a well-drained soil, with pH in the range of 5.5-6.5. Do not apply nitrogen, which will result in poor yield and lush foliage. The ability of southern peas to grow in poor soil is quite remarkable—many varieties are also used as cover crops—and they are relatively free of insects and disease in the Mid-Atlantic.

Harvest: Days to maturity are for fresh shelly-stage peas. For dry peas, add 2-3 weeks. For fresh use, harvest when seeds have filled the green pods, but before seeds have hardened. For dried use, make sure to harvest dried pods before rain or else seeds will mold. Let dried pods finish drying under cover in a rodent-proof space.

Cooking: Can be boiled, frozen, canned, or dried. Green seeds can be roasted like peanuts. Scorched seeds can be used as a coffee substitute. Leaves may be used as a potherb.

Animal pests: Deer love them. Fence off crops or cover plants with row cover when pods emerge.

Insect Pests: Weevils sometimes infest dried seed. To kill weevils, freeze thoroughly-dried seed in sealed containers for 48 hours.

Seed Savers: Isolate from southern peas and asparagus beans by a minimum of 50' for home use. For pure seed isolate a minimum of 150'.