Spring Pea Planting
By Carol Quish, UConn Home and Garden Education Center

Planting peas is a well-loved spring ritual practiced by many faithful gardeners. It really is an act of faith to bury a small seed into cold soil at winter’s end and believe a fruitful plant will be the result 60 days later.

There are three different types of peas to grow as vegetables: shelling peas, snap peas and snow peas. Shelling peas, also called English peas, are the traditional green pea harvested from inside the tough shell. The shells are not typically eaten. Snap peas and snow peas have edible pods. If snap peas are left to develop the peas inside, both pea and pods can eaten together. Snow peas are usually flat without developed peas inside the pod. All are delicious.

All peas prefer a pH of 6 to 7, well-drained soil and to be located in full sun for highest yield. Peas need less fertilizer than most other crops as they take nitrogen from the air and convert it in a form they can use. Adding more nitrogen can make the plants produce more leaves at the expense of flowers and fruit. Use well-rotted manure or compost mixed into the soil well at planting time for a slow release fertilizer.

Plant pea seeds once the soil is workable in the spring. Check soil to make sure it is not too wet. If you work in the wet soil, its structure becomes compacted, eliminating vital pore space for roots, air and future water. Determine if soil is dry enough to work and plant, by taking a handful of soil, making it into a ball in your hand. Poke it to see if the finger indent remains or if the ball falls apart like chocolate cake. A soggy ball with a finger indent is still too wet. If it crumbles like chocolate cake, it is good for planting.

Soak pea seeds in tepid water overnight, drain in the morning letting moisture cling to seeds. Cover the bowl and wet seeds with plastic wrap or seal entire bowl in a plastic bag to keep the seeds from drying out and dying. After roughly three days the seeds will germinate as seed the coat will expand and a white root tip will begin growing from the seed. Sprout the seeds inside, then very carefully place the individual sprouted seeds into a prepared trench one inch deep outside in the garden. Space each pea seed two to three inches apart. Take care not to damage the
fragile tissue of the new root. If planting peas in a new location add legume inoculant, a Rhizobia bacteria that has a symbiotic relationship with pea roots. This inoculant colonize the pea plant roots and help them ‘fix’ nitrogen in the soil and boost yield.

Water well once per week and insert a structure for the peas to climb. A fence, trellis or netting strung between poles provides support and makes picking easier. Water deeply once per week. Apply a mulch on top of soil around the plants to help retain moisture and keep the soil cool.

Extend the harvest by planting again two weeks later for continued production. Pea plants are cool season crops and best planted in spring and fall. The plants will die back once the heat of the summer happens. Fall planting made during September will produce a lighter crop, depending on the temperatures and frost.

Whether you grow shelling, snap or snow peas, try germinating inside, planting early and celebrate the return of spring. If you have a question about planting peas or on other gardening topics, please call the UConn Home and Garden Education Center, toll-free at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu, or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.