



Growing Tips for Beans, Corn & Peas

On the long list of things gardeners might want to try to grow, beans, corn and peas are usually near the top. All three are relatively easy to grow and do well in Montana.

Beans: The kinds of beans you can grow here is nearly endless. You can try pole beans, bush beans, beans for drying, beans for fresh eating, exotic varieties you can't find in a grocery store, and even soy beans for soy based foods.

Beans can be planted from seed directly into the garden or as small plants you grow inside for a few weeks before planting. Soak bean seeds overnight in bacterial inoculant to help the plants to process atmospheric nitrogen to available nitrogen for good growth. This is referred to as 'nitrogen fixing' and occurs in nodules on the plant roots. Plant seeds or plants after all danger of frost is past in a sunny site with good soil. Beans are a good choice for container gardening. Use a container that is at least 12 inches deep and wide for 3-4 plants.

If you are growing pole beans, provide a support for the vines to grown on. Harvest your pole bean crops to keep the plants producing. Bush beans produce one main crop which makes them a good choice for processing. If you are growing dried types, allow the pods to dry on the plant, then harvest and shuck them. If they have not dried before wet fall weather arrives, pull the whole plant up and hang it in a cool, dry place inside.

Corn: Did you know that modern sweet corn is the result of radiation experiments at the dawn of the nuclear age? It's true. Radiation is no longer used to create sweet corn but all of us who enjoy corn have seed saving scientists who 'played' with radiation to thank for our tasty treat.

Here in Montana it is a good idea to start corn seed inside about 3-4 weeks before last frost. Use peat or jiffy pots to avoid disturbing the roots; plant the container directly into the garden. Corn can be slightly crowded because it does not have a huge root system. Corn is not a good choice for container gardening. Each stalk will produce only one to three ears and it would take many containers to grow any size harvest. Be sure your corn plants won't shade nearby plants that need full sun. Plant in rich soil; the old wives tale about putting a fish head in each hole is about giving corn a nitrogen boost and is

quite accurate. A slightly less stinky solution is good soil that you replenish with compost or manure every year. Top dressing when corn plants are about 8 inches tall with fish fertilizer helps insure a good harvest.

Unfortunately corn has one bad habit. It can cross pollinate with other corn varieties quite easily. If your corn patch is too close to a farm field, your sweet corn may taste more like field corn. And sweet varieties planted next to each other will also cross pollinate, meaning you may be disappointed with their taste. You can avoid this by sticking to one type or using only open pollinated seed.

Harvest corn ears when the silk has just begun to turn brown. Or as the saying goes, harvest corn just before the raccoons do.

Peas: Peas and Montana's cool weather go together perfectly. In fact, you should plant your pea seeds directly into the garden on or about St. Patrick's Day, March 17th if the soil can be worked or if you prepared a spot in the fall. Like beans, peas are also capable of nitrogen fixing and soaking the pea seeds overnight in bacterial inoculant will both help them germinate and jump start their ability to fix nitrogen.

Select a site with full sun and soil that drains well. Peas are vining plants and need a structure to climb on. They can be planted next to the garden fence and allowed to climb up it or you can create a trellis for them. Once pea plants have reached about one foot, top dress them with fertilizer to encourage good growth. Peas are a good choice for container gardening. Use a container that is at least 12 inches deep and wide for 3-4 plants.

As the weather gets hotter as the growing season gets into high summer, pea plants will stop producing and may dry out. This is completely normal.

Remember there are different kinds of peas too. Shelling peas produce peas that you harvest from the pods. Snap peas produce edible pods with only small peas inside when they are young and tender. Pay close attention to the seed packs when you buy your seeds. Also remember that peas are a large seed and you may want to buy large packets if you plan to have a large garden.

Like all fresh vegetables, eating beans, corn and peas you grown yourself will spoil you for supermarket produce. But don't let that stop you!!