



TOP LEFT Jacky carries a tray of goats cheese and broad bean crostini. RIGHT Climbing purple pea 'Lancashire Lad' was a Victorian favourite. BELOW LEFT Hazel twigs are secured with twine to make a natural climbing frame for tall pea varieties. OPPOSITE PAGE Borlotti beans look great with their marbled rose effect.



Peas & Beans

Whether eaten straight from the pod or quickly cooked, these fresh, delicious crops signal the start of real summer eating

PHOTOGRAPHS MICHELLE GARRETT WORDS JACKY HOBBS

Peas and beans are both musts for the kitchen garden. They are easy to grow from seed, take up relatively little ground space (especially the climbing varieties), put on a lovely show of flowers, are easy to pick, and fun to pod. My kids love picking and podding them - so much in fact, not many make it back into the kitchen. If planted successionaly, peas and beans have an extensive season too. They are reasonably free of pests and diseases, as well as being great for crop rotation, as their roots will fix nitrogen into the soil in readiness for next year's crop.

The most difficult thing about growing legumes is choosing which varieties to go for. My advice is to decide whether you are looking for superior taste, speed of preparation, or, for example, shelling versus mangetout. With French and runner beans, you can eat the lot; while peas, broad beans, soya beans and Borlotti need podding. Perhaps you'll pick based on colour: you can choose from classic greens or fashionable black, purples and golds to bring interest to your plot and, of course, your culinary dishes.

Another consideration is climbers, which need support, as opposed to the stockier dwarf varieties that need less attention. Generally, shorter peas are self sufficient, if given a natural support of decorative pea sticks made from birch or hazel twigs. Climbing beans, peas and broad beans, which rocket skyward, are traditionally sown in ▶



Expert advice

CHRIS SMITH OF PENNARD
PLANTS RECOMMENDS
HERITAGE VARIETIES:

- **Broad beans** For an early crop, plant hardy varieties such as 'Aquadulce' and the fabulously decorative 'Crimson Flowered' broad bean in November. Sow in double rows, 25cm apart, 5cm deep; and leave 1m between rows. Nip off plant tops in full flower to increase yield and minimise black fly. Plant short, self-supporting varieties in more exposed sites. Try 'The Sutton' as it needs no staking.
- **French beans** Sow inside in April and outside in May. The curious 'Cosse Violette', a thin, tender pencil-like bean, picks rich purple but cooks green; and the beautifully marbled Borlotti bean, which can be eaten young like French beans, or left to mature and then shelled.
- **Runner beans** Give runners a head start, sowing indoors in pots in April, planting out in May. 'Celebration', with salmon pink flowers, is early and productive, reaching 2m tall; while 'Czar' is prolific and stringless.
- **Peas** The heritage tall purple pea 'Lancashire Lad' can be eaten early as mangetout, or later as a delicious podding pea. Mangetout pea 'Bijou' has enormous, great-tasting pods that won't go stringy with age, but it needs strong support. Dwarf pea 'Norli' is a modern but plot-worthy variety, producing a really sweet gourmet pea within eight weeks. You can grow this and pea 'Tom Thumb' in containers too.



ABOVE Cook straight from the plot for that 'just picked' flavour. **BELOW** Pesto, bean and chicken soup. **BELOW LEFT** Chris Smith from Pennard Plants. **OPPOSITE** Goats cheese and broad bean bruschetta.



'We had great fun cooking our dishes al fresco in the walled garden, with 10 minutes from picking to pot'

double rows, and need more structured support, such as a simple tent-frame cane structure or, in confined spaces, a teepee. If you find tying with string a bit fiddly, pre-formed wigwam cane grips are great for holding a circlet of canes together (for more information, go to www.thompson-morgan.com where you'll find them offered at £4.99 for two or £7.99 for four).

Although peas and beans are reasonably pest and disease free, Chris Smith from Pennard Plants recommends planting the 'Martock Bean' nearby to attract aphids away from the main crop. Alternatively, plant yellow-flowered plants in your plot to encourage hoverflies, which will eat aphids. He also suggests growing climbing bean varieties up wigwams in flower borders to make an attractive feature, or have a go training runner beans over arches and arbours.

When it comes to cooking, the freshest vegetables are best only barely cooked, to maintain just-picked crispness and flavour. We had great fun cooking our dishes *al fresco* in Pennard Plants walled garden, with 10 minutes from picking to pot. Beans are best blanched, plunged into boiling water until *al dente*. Thin beans like runners need about 90 seconds, while larger beans take up to two to three minutes; you can use these warm or cold or, if freezing surpluses, cool first in an ice bath to help preserve taste, colour and crispness. Bon appetit!

Where to buy & Events

- **Pennard Plants** For mail-order heritage vegetable seeds, as well as veg-growing masterclasses. See the website for a list of shows where Chris shows off his wonderful and witty heritage seed collections. East Pennard, Somerset BA4 6TP. Tel: +44 (0)1749 860039. www.pennardplants.com
- **Suttons** Get your children growing with Suttons 'Fun to Grow Jack and the Beanstalk Seeds': everything they need to get their beans running, as

well as activity sheets and stickers. Starting from £3.25. Woodview Road, Paignton, Devon TQ4 7NG. Tel: 0844 9222899. www.suttons.co.uk

- **Waterperry Gardens** One-day course 'Saturday Vegetables; Back to Basics' runs on 7 May from 10am-1pm. Includes advice on pests and diseases, winter crops and planning for spring. Quote course code GA18C when booking. £30. Nr. Wheatley, Oxford OX33 1JZ. Tel: +44 (0)1844 339254. www.waterperrygardens.co.uk

Recipe 1
Goats cheese &
bean bruschetta

- **Lightly toast slices** of French bread. For extra zip, then dab with garlic-infused olive oil, or rub the surface with a garlic clove.
- **Spread with soft goats cheese**; dot with fresh, blanched broad beans, and decorate with sprigs of thyme (*left*).

Recipe 2
Pesto, bean &
chicken soup

- **Use any ready-to-pick** bean, pea or other green vegetables (broccoli, asparagus). Wash your selection, slicing into 3-4cm lengths.
- **Bring home-made chicken** stock to the boil, and drop in handfuls of mixed prepared legumes, simmering for about five mins so they are crisp but tender.
- **Serve up a mountain** of crunchy peas and beans, in a shallow pool of chicken stock, topping each portion with a generous dollop of pesto and a sprig of basil (*opposite page*).

Recipe 3
Mixed bean
salad

- **Use any ready-to-pick** bean, pea or other green vegetable (broccoli, asparagus). Wash your selection, slicing into 3-4cm lengths. Blanch a selection of beans as before (*see main copy*).
- **Prepare a mixture** of 200ml olive oil, 75ml white or red wine vinegar, one teaspoon of Dijon mustard, and one of sugar. Season to taste.
- **Pour over blanched** vegetables and leave for an hour to absorb all the flavours. Toss, and then sprinkle with fresh herbs.

