

# Peas and beans

## a comparative study *Margaret Mason*

**M**y heading sounds terribly scientific, but this is just a few notes resulting from my observations of the various different varieties of beans and peas I have grown over the years. Runner beans and all forms of peas do particularly well in North Wales as they like plenty of rain, but I struggle with dwarf French beans so have not included these - except just to say that the purple variety 'Royalty' copes with my climate better than most (and my mother, in the South-East, swears by 'Stanley').

Climbing French beans do better, and I have had success with 'Cosse Violette' (purple-podded), 'Neckargold' (yellow) and 'Hunter' (the flat green type). There is also a yellow version of this, 'Golden Gate', which seems equally good, but 'Trionfo Violetta', which was described (and illustrated) as being flat-podded, is indistinguishable from 'Cosse Violette'; and I have tried it more than once. I have not tried the old (green) variety 'Blue Lake' but must do so next year.

Last year I grew a new cultivar, 'Jiminez', which is semi-flat, like old-fashioned dwarf beans before the pencil-podded type became fashionable, and interestingly streaked with dark red. This cropped well and I will try it again, but unfortunately this year all the seeds were eaten by rats! I have grown the climbing version of the Borlotto bean (bright red streaked), but, like dwarf beans, this really needs more sun than it's ever going to get here, and 'Jiminez' is a better alternative for me.

Overall, I find the flat 'Hunter' type consistently produces the heaviest crops, and is also the most successful in pots, which I have occasionally had to use due to lack of space. However, in my view no French bean gets anywhere near a runner for flavour, so if really restricted I would always go for those.

I used to grow any red-flowered runner that came to hand and 'Sunset', the pink-flowered one; but the latter disappeared, and then I discovered 'Painted Lady', a red/white bicolor. For years I grew only that as it is, in my experience, early, heavy-cropping and stringless (though I always pick my beans young, so as far as I'm concerned, most varieties are). The beans are short but that hardly matters as long as there are lots of them. Then I found 'Celebration', a new pink-flowered variety, and I now grow a few of these too as they are so pretty, but they don't produce anything like the crop 'Painted Lady' does (or indeed that 'Sunset' used to).

A couple of years ago a new type, 'Firestorm', appeared in the catalogues. I am usually impervious to the blandishments of catalogues, but I did like the sound of this, so gave it a try - and I'm glad I did! It has the usual red flowers, but produces a massive crop of long, slender beans of good flavour. I have also tried 'Snowstorm' (also called 'Starlight'), the white version, but it is not as prolific, and a bit slower. I think these are French/runner crosses like the much-vaunted 'Moonlight' which came out a few years ago, but I found 'Moonlight' to be very disappointing - a poor cropper and deficient in flavour, so I no longer grow it. I do occasionally put in a few 'Sunbright', red-flowered and golden-leaved, which are late and feeble (they hate wind), but the bright gold leaves cheer up the further reaches of the vegetable patch.

I am not much of an authority on broad beans as I am not that keen on them and dislike the more common white-seeded ones, but I have to grow them for the bees. I like the old crimson-flowered one for its spectacular show of flowers, and it produces short pods packed tightly with green beans - the pods may be only 3 inches long but contain 4 beans, whereas you can get pods 8 inches long on other varieties which only contain 5 or 6. I also grow 'Imperial Green Longpod' for no very good reason - it's tall and straggly and the pods, though they may contain 9 beans, are often half-empty, and I am sure there are better green-seeded varieties. One grown by my mother-in-law one year, 'Scaevola Verde', seemed very good. I do like 'Karmazyn', which is a fairly heavy cropper, and quick to start producing, for its pretty pink beans, which I eat raw when young; once cooked, they tend to turn an unappealing grey! 'Red Epicure' I tried and disliked (it tastes like the white-seeded ones) so only grew it the once and have little to say about it other than that it produced a decent crop.

Amongst peas, my absolute favourite shelling pea is 'Hurst Green Shaft', which carries long pods packed with delicious peas (they rarely make it to the saucepan round here), but alas this is a very short type and so the crop is relatively small. As a general rule I prefer to grow tall peas, since they take up the same space but keep on cropping, so you get a much heavier total crop. On the other hand, they occupy the ground for longer, so if you want to get your sprouts in you can whip the short ones out sooner! Also, if mildew is a problem in your garden, you are probably better off with repeat sowings of short varieties.

I used to grow 'Early Onward', which can go in quite early and is a heavy cropper for a short pea, but it finally dawned on me that with our early springs (normally!) I could put 'Hurst Green Shaft' in just as early, so I now don't bother with 'Early Onward' as the flavour is not quite so good. I have recently been growing 'Progress No 9', which can go in here early in March and is somewhat taller; this does produce tremendous crops, and early, with a decent flavour, but

again this year the whole row (300 seeds) was eaten by rats or mice (they missed 12, and you couldn't even see where they had dug). This variety is hard to source, but I shall persevere!

I also grow purple-podded peas (tall), usually from the CGS seed list, so I don't always know which variety they are; I just like them for the purple flowers and the pretty pods, the flavour isn't the best. 'Alderman' is the only tall green shelling pea I grow, and this I find very variable - some years it crops well, others very poorly. It tastes good. Finally, if I have seed (from the CGS) I grow crown peas, which are short and have the prettiest imaginable pink and white flowers, but very small pods with not particularly well-flavoured peas which are ready almost all at the same time so handy for freezing.



Rivalling runner beans for favourite vegetable is 'Sugar Snap'. In my experience all forms of snap pea have the same delicious taste, but 'Sugar Snap' is the only readily available tall one, so that's the one I grow. It keeps on cropping over a long period and even if it gets blown over by the wind and tied up again by me, the resulting tangled mass continues to put out new shoots and make new pods right into the autumn. In the last few years, an increasing number of the plants in the row have produced ordinary flat mangetout pods instead of the fleshy snap ones; I don't save my own seed and don't necessarily buy from the same supplier every year, so this is a bit of a mystery. I am going to enquire of the suppliers I most recently used as to whether they can shed any light on it.

Mangetout are pretty much a gift from the gods - they are mostly very good croppers and very early and fast as you don't have to wait for the peas to form. They are usually my first new-season crop and I always have so many I give them away in bucketloads. The varieties I grow are: 'Carouby de Mausanne', which is tall and has very large pods - they have the same flavour as the smaller ones but a slightly less crunchy texture, but their main charm is that they seem to form equally quickly but you only need about six or eight for a portion so you can almost always find enough for a meal; 'Golden Sweet', a relatively new tall variety with yellow pods which is by far the best cropper I have so far discovered, but possibly slightly less tasty (I can't make my mind up about this!); 'Weggiser', a tall green variety discovered at about the same time, years ago, in Switzerland by me and another member, Una Barratt, and now occasionally available in catalogues

here (as well as on the CGS list, thanks to Una); and ‘Shiraz’, a short, purple-podded type. This last I have grown for three or four years in various different parts of the garden and even in containers, and have decided to give up on it: the crop is poor, the pods slow to form and often tough, and this year is the first in which an appreciable proportion of them have been a reasonable size, flat and smooth (as shown in the catalogue illustrations!). Often the peas start to form before the pod has reached its full size, and they end up knobbly and misshapen. The flavour is not great, either. ‘Weggiser’ is a very reliable cropper (sometimes having a mid-season rest) which probably just has the edge for flavour and definitely has the best texture. I have grown ‘Oregon Sugar Pod’ in the past but was not overmuch impressed with it; it’s somewhere in between ‘Carouby de Mausanne’ and ‘Weggiser’ in pod size but not equal to either for flavour, and shorter so less heavy-cropping. All the varieties I grow have flowers in a sultry two-tone purple, and ‘Golden Sweet’ has yellow tips to the shoots.

So, my ‘best buys’ are: climbing French beans, ‘Hunter’; runner beans, ‘Firestorm’; broad beans, crimson-flowered; peas, ‘Hurst Green Shaft’, snap peas ‘Sugar Snap’; mangetout, ‘Weggiser’. The jury is still out on petits pois, as I’ve only just started growing them, but I will report in due course! The first crop was truly delicious but I don’t think I ate any of the peas cooked so don’t know how they fare in the kitchen...*Margaret is a member of the CGS Committee and runs our seed exchange. She gardens in Gwynedd, North Wales.*