

Mangetout pea 'Shiraz'



I have fallen hook, line and sinker for mangetout peas this summer.

It's not that I didn't like them before: it's just that I was reluctant to give up good growing space to them when the same space could just as profitably be given to 'proper' peas which you can then freeze (it's my inner Eastern European: I just have to have copious stores of food to see me through the winter or I start twitching uncontrollably).

You see, mangetouts are a decadent vegetable. They demand to be eaten crisp and sweet and fresh from the plant, or they droop into a sulk.

They will not store: you can pop them in the fridge for a day or two and they'll be OK, but beyond that and they turn a bit leathery. Try

putting them in the freezer and you'll regret wasting the electricity on them: they come out sadder, wetter and limper than a gardener's hat in a British summer.

They won't even stay on the plant till you're ready – you have to pick them at the peak of perfection, on the day they reach it, or the next day they'll have started swelling into proper (but vastly inferior) peas, and you'll lose all the advantages of having mangetouts without any of the advantages of having peas.

You see? Prima donnas, the lot of 'em.

But then I came across this one, and fell hopelessly in love.

I actually got sent a packet as part of a batch of 'mystery variety' seeds the year before it was released onto an unsuspecting gardening public: I knew little beyond the fact that it was a mangetout type pea. Well, I thought, I don't usually bother with those, but since it's a trial...

Wow. Great germination rates, cheerfully vigorous growth, and rudely healthy throughout: and all that before they even started to flower and fruit. These were something special from the start.

Then came the flowers.

Ohhhh.... the flowers. Even if this plant didn't produce peas, I'd grow it for the flowers. A sublime bicolour of pink and purple to outshine even sweetpeas in prettiness. I had to stay my hand to stop myself picking the stems for the house: it's a long time since I've seen a veg variety that so flagrantly asserts its right to be given centre stage. I had them tucked away in some obscure veg bed that first year, but ever since I've grown them in prime position, with a few in the main garden for good measure.

It doesn't stop there. This is the first purple mangetout: a novelty in some veg (and one which I've previously been a bit ambivalent about) the dark colouring here was the *coup de grace* which won my heart.

The pods are a deep, rich purple, nestling in a perfect arc of velvety darkness against the fresh green foliage. It almost seems a shame to pick them: but do, as if you leave them the purple is quickly spoiled by a creeping smudge of green, a clear sign that they're a tiny bit past their best and are about to blow.

Pick them at their most perfect purplishness, though, and they are rich, sweet, so crunchy you can eat them straight off the plant. They look – and taste – wonderful raw in salads. Steam them for a bare five minutes, and you have a finely-flavoured, sophisticated side dish which can only have been invented for the gods.

Sorry: it's not often I wax quite as lyrical as this, but then it's not often I come across a new variety which steals my heart so completely I couldn't imagine living without it. In fact I'm not sure it's ever happened before.

This is the third year I've grown 'Shiraz' and it just gets better. I'm on my third picking now and my little row is still pumping out the pods: I'm expecting to be still picking well into next month. There's something seductively luxurious about having a plateful of mangetout to eat alongside even the humblest of hasty post-school suppers: generosity as well as good looks. No wonder I'm in love.