



Early summer greens

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by Lydia Lovell



If any Cape Cod gardeners planted peas as early as the Ides of March, they may have begun harvesting the tender green pearls by mid-June. This, despite the wild storm that ushered out spring's first month and drove the 473-foot vessel "Eldia" ashore at Orleans. Despite, as well beginning one of the soggiest springs on record and a pervasive opinion the season was even later than usual, this year's early peas have been delicious.

Uncle Henry always put in his peas in mid-March. Sometimes that meant scraping an inch or so of snow blanketing the pea patch and dropping seed into semi-frozen ground, but Uncle Henry followed the calendar, not the climate, as far as planting peas was concerned.

"T'won't hurt them a particle," he'd say when Aunt Olivia expressed her opinion that he was rushing the season.

"Be a wonder if those peas don't rot in the ground," she'd warn. "They'd do just as well if you waited 'til the first of April. I doubt they'll do a blessed thing but sulk, Henry."

"Let 'em." His tone was complacent. "You'll be wantin' a mess of peas, come the first nice warm day in June. They'll be ready to pick then if they start now."

And ready they were. All through June we ate fresh peas whenever enough could be gathered to yield a quart or so, shelled. Aunt Olivia boiled them in no more water than it took to keep them from sticking to the pan and seasoned them with a bit of salt, a dash of pepper, and a nugget of butter.

Sometimes Aunt Olivia tossed in a few sprigs of spearmint to impart that herb's special flavor; other times she laid several leaves of head lettuce in the bottom of a saucepan, poured in the peas, added about a tablespoon of butter, and let them simmer slowly, tightly covered, for about half-an-hour. Peas steamed with lettuce may not only be of finer flavor, but could also be richer in nutrition than those boiled in water.

You've heard the nursery rhyme, "Pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold, Pease porridge in the pot, Nine days old" ...? Now what do you suppose pease porridge really was? According to recipes in Aunt Olivia's files, **Pease Porridge** was made by boiling a quart of shelled peas for about 15 minutes until tender, then pressing them through a sieve. (You could spin them in your blender.) Add to the resulting puree a teaspoon of salt, a quarter-cup of thick cream, and a dash of pepper. Fill six well-greased custard cups (or a muffin tin) and place in a shallow pan of boiling water. Bake 20 minutes at 325°. Pease porridge may be made early in the day and baked just before serving time.

When picking peas from your own vines, the quantity you end up with will depend upon how many pods you find that have swelled to the just-right stage. If you haven't a pea patch of your own, you probably buy fresh peas in the pod at the vegetable counter. Figure that a pound of pods will yield a bit more than a cup of peas and allow at least half-a-cup per serving.

Shelling peas is one of the old-fashioned comfortable chores that compares with popping corn in a wire basket over the surface of a hot cast-iron cookstove, or stringing cranberries to make a garland for trimming the Christmas tree, or baking your own pumpkins for pies at Thanksgiving time.

Shelling peas is an activity to be undertaken only while relaxing in a splint-seated rocking chair (preferably one painted green) on a screened-in porch while bumble bees hum among wisteria blossoms that droop like pale bunches of lavender grapes from a trellis over the door. Memories of helping Aunt Olivia shell peas in just such a setting are sweet ones.

Aunt Olivia liked to serve vegetables in unusual combinations. Sometimes she needed to combine them to make enough to go around. One such marriage became a favorite with the Lovell family. Since Uncle Henry preferred his vegetables either raw or well-cooked, he enjoyed **Peas and Cauliflower Salad** prepared as follows:

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| 1 small cauliflower | dashes of lemon pepper, |
| 1 C. raw fresh peas | garlic salt and celery salt |
| 1 stalk celery | 1 T. minced onion |
| 1/2 C. mayonnaise | 1/2 t. seasoned salt |
| 2 T. milk | |

Combine mayonnaise, milk, minced onion and seasonings. Slice celery thinly. Cut cauliflower into tiny flowerets, no larger than the first joint of your thumb. Combine raw peas, raw cauliflowerets, celery slices and the dressing, toss lightly, and serve on lettuce cups. If fresh peas are not available, use half-a-package of frozen ones. Thaw them quickly by turning them into a sieve and dipping them into boiling water. Drain well before adding to salad.

Spinach is usually ready to pull at about the same time peas fatten in their pods, but is available at many vegetable stands much later in the summer. Many of us who make up today's older generation enjoy this green vegetable in spite of the fact (perhaps because of it!) that spinach was practically forced to us when we were children. Our elders believed spinach possessed important nutrients, and Aunt Olivia did her best to render the strong-flavored vegetable palatable. We children liked best among her several methods a concoction she called **Binny Spinach**.

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| 2 lbs. spinach | dash of pepper |
| 4 eggs, separated | pinch of garlic powder |
| 2 T. margarine | (optional) |
| 1/4 C. sugar | 1 C. soft bread crumbs |
| 1/4 t. salt | 1/4 C. Parmesan cheese |

Wash spinach thoroughly, remove tough stems and chop coarsely. Separate eggs and beat whites until stiff;set aside.

Beat egg yolks until lemon-colored, add sugar and seasonings. Toss bread crumbs in melted margarine; then stir in Parmesan cheese. Combine egg yolk mixture with chopped spinach, fold in egg whites, and heap into a greased casserole. Top with buttered bread crumbs and cheese. Bake in 350° oven 25 to 30 minutes. This makes a nice meal when combined with pan fried ham steak. Serve fresh fruit compote for dessert.

Seldom-used, but too fine to warrant neglect and in European countries considered an early summer treat, is sorrel. This green flourishes in every open field, much like a weed (and many people consider it one, calling it "sour grass"). Tart leaves of sorrel can add a welcome tang to salads, will bring chicken broth to life, and give zip to gravies. Combine thoroughly washed and finely chopped sorrel with grated cabbage and carrots to prepare a cole slaw without equal. Shake one tablespoon of cider vinegar and one of sweet-pickle juice together with two tablespoons of olive oil, stir in a dollop of mayonnaise; toss sorrel, carrots, and cabbage with dressing. Chill at least two hours before serving.

All of us who are bitten, in spring, by the bug that makes us believe we're truly vegetable farmers at heart (and the Lovells have never been the only ones who caught this "virus"), plant a row of radishes as soon as the ground is warm and are rewarded in a few short weeks with the first harvest of the season. Many of us enjoy radishes just as they come from the earth; we rub off the sand on our jeans and crunch the sweet ruby globes with relish. Radish roses are pretty served with carrot sticks and celery stalks. Radish coins and green pepper rings brighten potato salads.

But some people find radishes difficult to digest. For them, cooking radishes may be a solution. If cooking radishes sounds like a new idea, be reassured. Chinese and Japanese cooks have been parboiling, frying, boiling and mashing, and baking radishes for centuries. In fact, young radish leaves, prepared like any other leafy green vegetable, are considered a delicacy in Oriental cookery.

New England whaling men, returning from foreign voyages more than a hundred years ago, asked their wives and mothers to slice a few radishes into the spider when they were frying up potatoes at breakfast-time. Sliced thin and fried in butter, radishes complement a broiled steak. Or remove leaves and root from a couple of big bundles of radishes, parboil for five minutes, drain, and turn into a buttered casserole. Top with buttered crumbs and bake at 350° until fork-tender. Surprisingly good.

By the end of June, Uncle Henry's vegetable garden looked entirely different from its aspect at the beginning of the month. Early on, lettuce and spinach plants were young and tender; by the month's end, most had been harvested and consumed. Tomato plants set out Memorial Day weekend had grown nearly waist-high by Independence Day. Not only were they full of blossoms, but small green globes were swelling day-by-day. The season for peas, lettuce, radishes, spinach draws to an end, and that for squash, cucumbers, peppers, beans and tomatoes begins.

There's plenty of good eating from the garden yet to come!