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Peanuts - Grow Nuts in the Garden Next Year

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GARDEN NOTES

PEANUTS - GROW NUTS IN THE GARDEN NEXT YEAR

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Peanuts are one of those plants that are as fun to grow and watch as they are to eat. Though most people think of them as a southern crop, they can be grown anywhere with 120 frost-free days. This is the same length of time it takes a melon or long-season corn to mature. So, even the Wasatch Front qualifies as a peanut-growing area.

Peanuts are actually a legume, related to beans and peas, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. If you have never seen peanuts grow it is quite an education. Peanut seedlings resemble a clover plant. Five to seven weeks later, they set small, yellow flowers which look like small pea or bean flowers.

As the yellow flower dies, a shoot starts to grow from the middle of the flower. This shoot is called a "peg," he explains. On the end of the peg is the embryo formed in the flower. The peg, which looks similar to a tendril, grows down, lodging itself in the soil. The embryo, which becomes embedded in the soil, turns a horizontal direction and begins to grow a pod that will contain between two and four seeds or nuts.

"Few plants have such a unique mechanism for producing seed," Goodspeed says. "Each plant can produce as much as one to three pounds of peanuts. This year, there were several entries of peanuts and peanut plants at the county fairs. Most of them looked healthy and seemed to be heavy producers."

Peanuts prefer a fertile, well-drained soil, he says. Heavy soils and excess water can cause chlorosis and reduce growth and seed production. Work organic matter into the garden before planting peanuts. Keep the soil loose and workable around the plant so the pegs and embryos can easily work themselves into the soil.

The seeds can be planted directly into the garden after the last frost in the spring, Goodspeed says. If protected from freezing temperatures, they can even be planted earlier. In shorter season areas, peanuts can be started indoors about four to five weeks before planting outdoors.

"Try short-season peanuts," he suggests. "The 'Virginia' types are usually 100 to 120 days to maturity. 'Early Spanish' is another variety that grows well in this area. Avoid roasted peanuts. They are great for snacking, but don't germinate too well."

Seeds should be planted about one to two inches deep and spaced four to six inches apart, Goodspeed says. It is best to space the rows about two feet apart, but wider rows can be made by off-set planting. Peanuts have relatively few pest problems, but keep them as weed-free as possible.

“Peanuts are normally harvested in the fall after the first light frost has killed or damaged some of the leaves,” he says. “Using a garden spade, carefully dig the plants and pick the peanuts out from the roots and pegs. Some gardeners lift out the entire plant and hang it in the garage for a few days to let the peanuts dry. Another option is to pick the peanuts off the plant and air dry them in a warm, well-ventilated room.

“Children find it fascinating, and they also make a great snack. I prefer fresh peanuts to those bought in the store. After they are harvested and dried, they can be stored for months for a home-grown holiday treat.”

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