

Pea moth

Hidden from view, the caterpillars of this pest feast on developing peas in the pod. All types of peas are at risk, including ornamentals such as sweet peas.

Q What is pea moth?

A It is a drab, small moth (*Cydonia nigricana*) that lays its eggs on pea flowers. The resulting caterpillars tunnel into the pod, and feed on the peas. You don't even know it is there until you shell them.

Q Which plants does it affect?

A Pea-family plants. Peas are attacked, but runner, French and broad beans seem immune. Among ornamentals, sweet peas are at risk, but not lupins.

Q How do I recognise it?

A The moth is small (15mm) and grey-brown, with white wing tips. It is usually hard to spot. Sometimes it is seen on pea plants in summer, especially around mid-July. The most reliable way to spot it is to use a pheromone trap. These use attractants normally given off by male moths, to lure females to sticky traps. The eggs are tiny green scales. They are hard to spot; look for them around flowers on leaves and stipules. You will need a hand lens.

Q What damage does it do?

A Pale-yellow caterpillars 9mm long with black heads and brown

dots feed on peas inside the pods. Usually only a few peas in each pod are affected as there are rarely more than two caterpillars per pod, and each caterpillar needs only one or two peas to feed on. By sorting, you can still save much of the crop.

Q When can I expect attacks?

A The moths spend the winter in cocoons in soil where peas were grown last year and in nearby rough ground and rubbish heaps. They come out in late May and June and are active all summer. During June and July they lay their flattened, tiny eggs in twos and threes on leaves and around flowers. These hatch in about eight days. The tiny caterpillars make their way to the pods and tunnel inside. It takes about three weeks for them to mature, after which they cut their way out and fall to the ground. Before pupating, they burrow into the soil and form cocoons, in which to spend the winter. In spring they leave the cocoons and come closer to the surface, where they weave other cocoons in which to pupate. They leave as adult moths.

Q Could I mistake it for anything else?

A Maggots found in emerging peas

in late spring are probably those of the bean-seed fly. This pest does not attack pods.

Other pea troubles are pea thrips (thunder flies), which attack the pods, giving them a silvery sheen

Q Can pea moth be sprayed?

A Once the caterpillar is inside the pod, sprays are ineffective. There are no preventative sprays available to gardeners. Too early and their effect will have worn off before the moth arrives, too late and the caterpillar will be safe inside the pod.

Q Can it be avoided?

A When peas flower before mid-June they escape attack, as pods will be past the vulnerable stage by the time the moth is on the wing. Sowing in October and November under cloches, or in pots indoors in January and February and outdoors until mid-March, will avoid the moth. You'll need to use a fast-growing early variety such as 'Daybreak', 'Holiday' or 'Douce Provence', though. Early sowings outdoors can rot in the ground. Covering the sowings with fleece will help them survive.

Sowings after the middle of May will be in flower too late for the moth to infest them. Since

these late peas can get mildew, use a mildew-resistant variety like 'Cavalier' or 'Top Pod'.

Q What should organic growers do?

A Covering pea crops with insect-proof mesh when they are in flower from mid-June onwards will protect the pods. It will also keep birds off - birds, especially jays, can destroy many pods.

Q Are mangetout and snap peas affected?

A These are eaten when the

seeds are very small, which is usually before the caterpillars have damaged the edible parts.

Q What should I do with affected plants?

A The plants themselves can be composted, as the moths enter the soil after leaving the pods. Dig over the pea patch early in the autumn to let birds and other predators eat as many cocoons as possible.

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