The field pea is a valuable annual legume for both the stock and the soil of the farm. It was grown in Canada many years before it was introduced into the United States. For this reason all kinds of field peas on this side the line are usually spoken of as “Canada Field Peas.” It has only been within the last few years that farmers of Colorado have realized the value of this crop to the farm.

CLIMATE AND SOIL REQUIREMENTS—Peas do best in a cool, moist climate, where cool nights prevail. Many mountain valleys in the Rocky Mountain region seem to be peculiarly adapted to the field pea culture. By seeding early in spring, so blossoms and pods may form before the hot summer days come, this crop can be grown much farther south than is generally accorded to it by agricultural writers. Early seeding is really desirable in all sections of the United States where grown, since this crop is quite hardy. A clay loam, not too heavy in texture, affords an ideal soil for this crop, provided there is good drainage in the subsoil below. A sandy loam with ample moisture conditions gives also a satisfactory growth. The ground for seed bed conditions should be moist and well firmed, but not hard, and in good surface tilth, so as to render plant food easily available to the young plants. The writer is well aware that some successful pea farmers in Colorado seed this crop in grain stubble, with a disk drill, with profitable results, but a well prepared seed bed would have given more profitable returns. Plow in the fall where possible, spring disk, firm and level the ground for seeding.
SEEDING THE CROP—As early as the season will permit seed the crop. This should be the very first crop the farmer should plan to put in, after the frost is out of the ground sufficiently to get the seed bed ready for seeding. Many Colorado farmers find the grain drill one of the most satisfactory seeders which they can use. They stop up every other hole, or seed two holes and stop up two right through the drill box. This places the rows sixteen inches apart (most drills in the west are eight-inch drills), or two rows eight inches apart, with twenty-four inches between each pair of rows. If cultivation of crop is planned the latter method is the preferable one.

Since the vines have a tendency to a recumbent growth, many farmers seed oats or barley with the peas to hold them up. The proportion is varied to suit their conditions and the purpose for which the crop is grown.

The amount of peas used to seed the ground varies with locality, climatic conditions, purpose for which the crop is grown and the size of the peas used for seed. Some farmers use as high as 100 pounds per acre, while farmers in the San Luis valley, where 75,000 acres are being grown, use from thirty-five to fifty pounds per acre. In this valley the pea vines grow from six to twelve feet long and when seeded too thick, lack of sunlight blights the blossoms; pods therefore fail to form as plentifully as they should and the grain yield is seriously cut down. The small varieties of peas generally produce the greater proportion of forage.

HARVESTING THE CROP—If the crop is to be cut for hay or forage chiefly, it is best to cut when 75 per cent. of the peas are coming into the middle dough stage, or the pods turning from green to yellow in the ripening stage and the vines have still a rich green color.

The method of cutting, at the present time, is not wholly satisfactory. A mowing machine with a good strong high pea guard attached to the sickle bar is generally used for cutting the peas, but the rank growth of vines tends to clog up the mower, even with the pea guard attachment, and Prof. Bainer, the Farm Mechanics Instructor at the Agricultural College, is seeking a better device to help the pea farmers cut their pea forage with more satisfactory results. When the crop is cut, it is cured and stacked in the same way alfalfa hay is put up. When the grain is the main purpose of the crop, permit 80 per cent. of the peas to get into the hard dough before cutting. Cure and stack as in the first instance.

The peas can be threshed by the grain separators if concaves are removed and care be used in the threshing operation to avoid cracking the peas. A pea huller or thresher is made especially for separating the grain from the forage, which does much more satisfactory work than the average grain thrasher and is recommended where sufficient areas of peas are grown for grain to justify the purchase of such a machine.
SAN LUIS VALLEY METHOD OF HARVESTING—For years the farmers of the San Luis valley grew grain crops successfully, grain following grain, until the yields were reduced too near the cost of production for grain farming to prove profitable. It was then two good “down east” farmers who had grown peas “back home” tested the value of the peas as a valley crop and found they did well in that environment. One of these farmers conceived the idea of turning in the sheep when the peas were ripe to fatten on the crop and save the expense of harvesting. The plan worked out very successfully and gave to the valley a new crop and a most profitable feeding industry. Lambs were procured from New Mexico and Utah and turned on the pea fields when ripe to fatten on this most excellent forage and grain ration. The feeding season was all that could be desired, usually cool, clear and dry, so that all that seemed necessary was a coyote-proof corral for night and a good shepherd to direct and control the sheep while feeding by day. This harvested the crop, distributed a valuable manure on the pea field, and produced a very superior mutton in from ninety to 120 days. By 1903 it was no uncommon sight to see fields of eighty, 160 and even 320 acres given over to this crop, and at the close of the feeding season lambs came out of these San Luis valley pea fields by the thousands to find a market peculiarly and largely their own.

In the midst of the feeding season 1904-05 came one of the worst snowstorms known to the valley, covering the peas in the field many inches deep with snow, preventing the lambs from foraging until weather conditions melted the snow sufficiently to get at the peas. No peas had been harvested and stacked to tide the lambs over such storms until they could gather their own feed in the field. It was a crisis, which happily lasted but a few days. In the fall of 1905 over 250,000 lambs were estimated to have been brought into the valley to be fattened on the pea crop. Many new settlers, not familiar with pea culture, nor lamb feeding, joined with their neighbors in this heretofore lucrative business. The peas that year made a luxuriant growth but the blossoms failing to set the usual percentage of pods, the feeding value of the pea fields was seriously cut down, while the lamb crop brought in to be fattened was in excess of former years. This forced many to send to market lambs improperly finished, since the feed was entirely exhausted.

This worked a hardship to all the valley feeders, brought down the price of lambs and caused many to suffer serious loss. In the fall of 1906 many farmers cut and bunched their peas in the field, but the writer strongly urges pea farmers to cut and stack at least a portion of the peas to provide ample forage for lambs in case of severe storms as in the last two winters.

Care in selection of better grain producing peas, methods of seeding and irrigation, which will encourage grain production and lessen vine growth, is strongly urged. We should encourage a study of field
peas, increasing to 3,000 pounds of grain per acre as a desired standard. To this end, the writer distributed 30,000 pounds of a very choice grain yielding strain of field peas this season, hoping in this way to assist farmers of this great pea raising valley to gain that which will increase meat production from this valuable grain and forage crop.

Field peas belong to the same class of plants as clover and alfalfa and have the same effect in enriching the soil, and thereby increasing the yields of all crops that follow them.