



# Conversations with Neighbors: Peas and Peppers

[\(From the Outlaw Garden Web Site\)](#)

by Cristina on May 30, 2014

**Meet the gardener:** My name is Cristina Santiestevan, and I am a rule-breaking, HOA-snubbing, renegade gardener. I am also a [writer and photographer](#), and regularly combine my passions for gardening, science and language by writing for publications like [Organic Gardening Magazine](#) and [Smithsonian](#).

It started with the '[Golden Sweet](#)' snow peas. After two months of growth, the plants had reached 4+ feet in height and were pushing out an abundance of delightfully yellow peas. They were ready — some past ready — for harvest.

I was picking my first of the peas for dinner, which was waiting half-prepped in the kitchen. I had a new recipe in mind, and was distracted thinking about the flavors of ginger and sesame oil and fresh-picked snow peas. I wasn't really paying attention, and so I was startled when a voice shouted up from the street.

“Are those peas?” It was a guy with his son, taking an evening walk. They were standing at the base of the driveway, about 50 feet away. Total strangers, though almost certainly neighbors of some sort.

“Yep!” I shouted back. “My first harvest of the season.”

Then, the magic moment: “Want some?”

Now, to be honest, I expected him to say “no.” Not that I didn't want him to take them — I had plenty still to pick — but that we humans just aren't in the habit of accepting generosity from strangers. I figured he'd say something along the lines of “Thanks, but blah blah blah.” But that's not what happened at all.

“Sure!”

And so I found myself walking down the driveway with a handful of fresh-picked peas to give to a total stranger. It was great. He accepted the whole handful, and we started chatting. First we discussed peas, and the crazy late spring that rushed forward to summer with no pause. Then he asked about the diminishing pile of compost in the driveway, and I gave him the info on my source and my thoughts on the quality of the compost.

Right about now, I realized I still didn't know his name. “I'm Cristina,” I said, extending my hand. “Jeremy,” he replied, shaking my hand. “I live just around the corner.”

And then, he mentioned peppers. “I just planted my peppers. I've got 41 plants this year, all started from seed.” I was impressed, and told him so. “Yeah,” he replied, “I've got them planted everywhere. In the garden, in the flower beds, in the landscaping...”

Holy cow! This guy — my neighbor from one street over — is an outlaw gardener too!



My first response was to laugh. Because, really? Wow. Then — of course — we spent a few minutes chatting about the joys of mingling veggies with flowers. He complimented my pea trellis, which stands tall at the top of my driveway. I laughed as explained that I grew all my veggies out front, because the backyard didn't offer enough sunlight. He thought it was great that my front walk was surrounded by herbs — “I like my landscaping to do something,” I'd said — and agreed that it was great to just step outside and pick something for dinner.

*I didn't bring up the blog, so chances are slim that Jeremy is reading this. But, hey, Jeremy, if you are reading this, it was great to meet you!*

We talked a few more minutes before his quietly-patient kid started to fidget. So they returned to their walk and I returned to my peas, a smile on my face.

## Two Lessons for Front Yard Gardeners

This was a few days ago, and I'm still thinking about it.

I've always suggested [we front yard gardeners should be nice to our neighbors and offer them harvests](#), but rarely do I follow my own advice. Oh, I smile and wave. But, it's so easy to stop there, and just return to the weeding or planting or harvesting or... But, no longer. While the harvests are coming in, I'm going to make an effort to share more and more of it. Because, who knows how many other rule-breaking gardeners might be living in my neighborhood and walking right past my lawn.

I'm also still thinking about the fact that Jeremy actually said “yes” when I offered up some peas. So many other folks would have said no, finding some excuse or another for maintaining that “polite” distance we American adults all seem to think is necessary. But, not Jeremy. And thank goodness. By accepting those peas, he helped move our conversation from some shouted “hellos” to something much more real and valuable. Thanks, Jeremy!



**Cristina Santiestevan**

I think there are two lessons here:

1. **Always offer.** Don't settle for the wave and shouted “hello.” Take the conversation one step further whenever possible. Out front picking cherry tomatoes for lunch? Why not offer some? “Hi! Great weather today! Hey, I'm harvesting some cherry tomatoes here for my lunch, and have more than I need. Want some?” So easy. Takes a few more words than a standard smile and wave, but opens up so many more great possibilities. Go ahead and try it sometime.
2. **Always accept.** Ok, this doesn't apply to everything in life. Please employ common sense. But, if a neighbor is out gardening and offers up some cherry tomatoes, that's probably a pretty safe scenario. Even if you have a kitchen filled with fresh-picked tomatoes, go ahead and accept this handful too. You may strike up an interesting conversation. You may discover a new variety you like. You may even make a friend.

It's so easy to walk through our neighborhoods without really connecting with our neighbors. The funny thing is that it's also incredibly easy to make those connections. It starts by getting past “hello.” Peas work well, I've learned.