

How I grow sweet peas.

I'm not an avid flower grower, I'm more into vegetables, but still appreciate a good flower. Thirty years ago I grew some sweet peas and was instantly taken to growing them, they have a wonderful scent. Flower profusely for months; a wide range of colours, the spencer type can look stunning. They make a good cut flower. Grow sweet peas and you can have cut flowers all summer long

There is a vast range of different coloured varieties and the range of potency of their scent is also quite wide. You can have fun trying different varieties for many years, I tend to grow different varieties each year and still have many more to try.

If you grow them primarily for their scent, then pick an old fashion sweet pea variety, which has a much smaller less flamboyant flower shorter flower stems, but stronger scent. America is a pretty red and white stripy old fashion sweet pea with a potent scent just a few stems of this old fashion sweet peas will fill a room with their scent, there are other old fashion varieties.

The spencer type of sweet pea are more flamboyant and frillier with longer and stronger flower stems, they are lovely to look at. However most of the plants energy seem to go into producing a lovely flower, sometimes at the expense of the scent. Some still, however have a good scent as well. To me however beautiful, sweet peas without a scent seem rather sad. If you are growing for showing then this is the type of sweet pea to grow.

Then you can have sweet pea varieties that only grow about 45 cm tall. The varieties that I grew many years ago still produced good cut flowers. They have the advantage of not needing to be supported or very little support.

Sweet peas need a fertile rich soil to do well, they are hungry plants. Place them in a sunny position is preferable. Manure the ground before planting/sowing and also add a general fertilizer a few weeks before hand.

You can sow them in the spring or autumn (October to December). I find if I am overwintering October produce the best plants. Autumn sown plants produce much better plants than spring sown, flowering earlier. However spring sown plants flower a little later and give you flowers later into the season.

Sowing your sweet peas

There are three ways to prepare your sweet peas for sowing as they have hard seed coats.

- 1 Sow without any treatment
- 2 Chit the seeds with a knife cutting the seed coat slightly, or rub the coat with an abrasive material. I have never tried this so cannot give any views on this.
- 3 Soak in water to soften the coat, before sowing.

I find very little difference between one and three. Germination is usually quite good. However, if you soak your seeds, then I find, if you soak longer than 12 hours the germination rate drops off especially once you start to go beyond 24 hours

Autumn Sown:

Sow 4 seeds in about a four to six inch pot; press them into the compost about half an inch below the surface maximum, they do not need any additional heat to germinate. When the seeds germinate keep the plants in a sheltered place e.g. cold frame or cold greenhouse. Do not cosset them; you do not want top growth over the winter, but root development. Treat them hard over winter and they will produce better plants. They will need little water over the winter maybe watering 2 or three times only.

Seedlings will grow slowly over the winter, growth will probably look a little thin and weak. When the plants have about three or four leaves, pinch out the growing tip. This will force side shoots to develop. By this time the light levels are increasing and the side shoot should be nice and sturdy. The side shoot is superior for flowering. If you want to show the sweet peas limit the side shoot to one only. The haulms will thicken up considerably during the summer.(haulms are the stems of peas, beans, or potatoes without the pods or tubers).

Harden off and plant out March to April. They are quite resistant to cold weather. Then carefully separate the plants trying not to break the roots or stem and plant 30 cm apart.



October sown sweet peas, with their growing tips pinched out. Picture on the right shows a side shoot developing after pinching out.

Spring sowing

Around March you can sow directly into the soil, sow seeds about 30 cm apart.

I like to scatter a few slug pellets after sowing and a few more once the seed has germinated. This reduces the slug population before the seeds germinate and gives a little more protection once the seedlings appear.

Pinch out the growing tips as per autumn sown plants.

The way you now grow sweet peas depends on if you are going to show the plants or not.

For a garden display and cut flowers throughout the summer, let them scramble up some sticks, netting or canes. You can give them some help to get started up the support by tying them in, then they generally just climb up themselves but will need a little tying in of any wayward stems.

You can also sow/plant into largish containers large flower pot and climb up a wigwam.

For Showing you use a different method. I like to grow them this way as I get fewer but better flowers with the spencer varieties.

The method is the cordon system. You allow only one stem to grow up the supports. The supports are built like the traditional runner bean support, in a long row. All side shoots are removed. Some people remove the tendrils as well. I tend to remove the tendrils as they tend to cling on to the flowers and cause u shaped flower stems. You need to regularly tie the stem to the support. Some people use string as a support, winding the plant around the string as it grows. The string is tied to a frame over - head.

When the plants are about three or four feet high you undertake, what is known as layering the plants. This involves carefully lowering all the plants to the ground. The Plant haulm is then moved along the row of bean poles so that the last six to eight inches of the tip of the plant lays past another pole further down the row. The growing part of the plant going past the pole is then tied to the pole. The plant then grows up the new pole. Take care not to damage the haulm when doing this.

The plants will be in flower or just coming into flower when you layer the plants. You will get bent flower stems for about three weeks after doing this. The reward is improved flowers, at a height that you can reach later in the season.

You will need to water and feed regularly. I use a tomato feed about once a week to once a fortnight and water every two to three days, more frequently if the weather is very hot and dry.

You must pick flowers regularly. If left the plant will go to seed and producing fewer flowers with shorter stems .

Sweet peas fertilize themselves before the flower is open, so you can save the seed.

Problems:

Green fly. It is important to keep the plants greenfly free. The main reason is the greenfly's saliva can contain a virus which will take all the vigor out of the plant and may kill it. The virus will very quickly

make the flower stems shorter and give a mottled effect to the flowers. Plants affected should be removed and destroyed to try to stop or slow down the spread to other plants.

Flower stems become shorter, this is caused by a number of things:

Letting the flowers go to seed. Remedy by removing the seed pods and feed. If you are lucky the length of stems may lengthen, but will not be as good as before.

Virus has infected the plant and flower colour usually also affected. Remedy remove the plant.

The plant has produced too many side shoots all flowering, so the plants energy is spread out too thinly. You may get longer stems if you remove the side shoots that have grown, so that the plant can give all its energy to one or a few stems. Then feed it. They will however be shorter than before

The plant is getting older, as the season goes on.

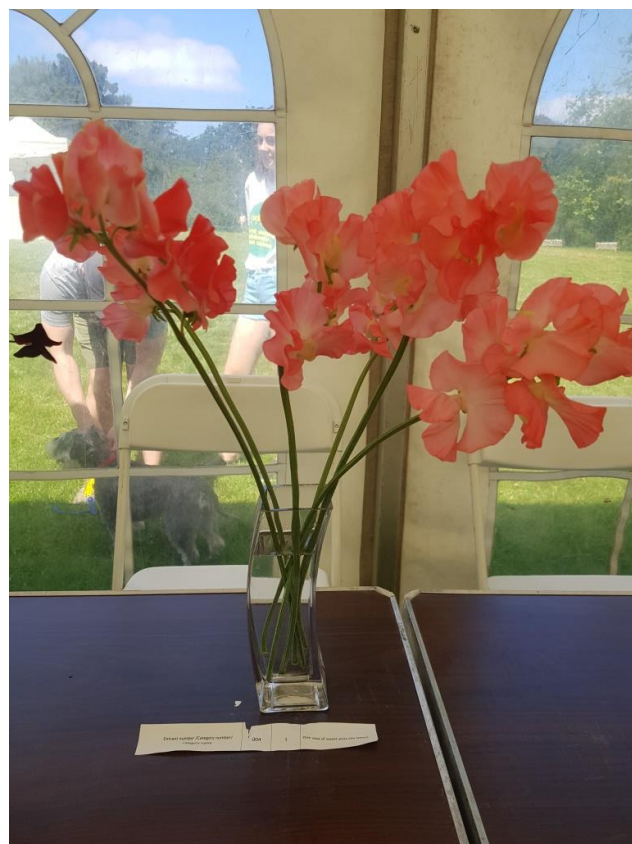
Mildew This can happen usually later in the season especially after the plants have peaked.

The plants if grown well can grow quite tall e.g. to the top of an 8 foot cane after being layered.

It is important to keep cutting the flowers otherwise the plant will stop flowering and what is produced will have very short stems.

From personal experience I have found that the cordon method of growing, will produce superior long stemmed flowers and the stems keep their length for a longer period.

If you are growing old fashion sweet peas then the cordon method seems to have little or no effect on the flowers, unlike the spencer varieties, so is not worth the extra effort.



Things to do in February

Chit potatoes in a cool but frost free place where they get some light but not direct sunlight. February is a difficult month for sowing as it can be too cold and wet for the seed and they rot. Save some of your seed for March if you decide to take a chance, the reward is an earlier harvest.

If the weather allows, you can direct sow your broad beans in February along with early peas such as Feltham First and Meteor for a May / June harvest. This early in the year your best chance would be to start your peas/beans in the greenhouse or a coldframe and plant later. Peas sown this early will avoid the pea moth the cause of caterpillars in your pea pods.

If you have some guttering and room in the greenhouse you can sow the peas in guttering, then when the plants are big enough slide the pea plants off the guttering into the ground. You have a better chance with broad beans if you sow in modules which have at least 2 inches depth of potting compost.

You can direct sow parsnips now but it will probably be too cold and wet and better to wait till March.

Jerusalem artichokes and shallots can be planted now, Shallots under a cloche is better.

Have cloche in place 2 weeks before to warm the soil.

Under Cover Greenhouse Polytunnel

Sow your summer cabbages such as Greyhound and Primo, as well as turnips, spinach, lettuce, rocket, radish and onion seeds

With gentle heat to germinate the seeds and good light sow aubergine and peppers, chillies and tomatoes and celeriac. Remember to remove that heat once germinated to avoid leggy plants, keep them cool but not cold.

If you have an propagator, grow lights and a well-lit not too warm but not too cold position you can often use the propagator to start seeds off a month earlier than that stated on seed packets. Remove seedlings as soon as they germinate or they will become leggy. Then use the grow-lights to extend the light after dusk. You need to keep the plants just warm enough to keep growing well but not too warm as it will make the plants leggy. Many plants have a set number of weeks between germination and harvesting, so you must keep them growing to get a good harvest.

This requires a lot of space after you pot up, the plants will be quite large by the time you plant them out after the last frost in mid-May.