

Sweet Peas

TEXT: LINDA ROSS



We planted Mr Fothergills 'Hi Scent', also sold as 'High Scent' and 'April in Paris' which has an exquisite form and fragrance, as well as vase-friendly long stems. Bred by Dr Keith Hammett, this sweet pea is recognised as the benchmark cultivar for scent and was given the Royal Horticultural Society Award for Garden Excellence. Our other favourite is the maroon in the Yates 'Colourcade' mix. This year we are planting more of Keith Hammett's sweet peas.

IMAGE BY LUISA BRIMBLE.

Sweet peas (*Lathyrus odorata*) are annual climbing plants with fragrant and romantically ruffled, pea-shaped blooms. Though they have intoxicated cottage gardeners since their discovery way back in 1695, I had no burning desire to grow them. At least I didn't until a recent, fateful, visit to the Chelsea Flower Show.

Inside the Grand Pavilion were perfectly arranged waves of intensely fragrant sweet peas. Suddenly I had to have them! It was as if some ancient English genetic activity kicked into gear and I was helpless to resist its urges. I bought a few packets, debated with Australian customs and sowed them. That was the beginning of more failed attempts than I care to remember. Several seasons, and quite some research later, we have developed a successful strategy that sees the house filled with those lovely blooms all through spring.

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OUR FAVOURITES

The Chelsea Flower Shows stunners that hooked me were Spencer sweet peas. They were named by Silas Cole, head gardener to the Earl of Spencer, who in 1901 found a natural mutation in the garden under his care. The Spencer type became very popular because its ruffled standard (the upper petal) and long wing (lower petals) offered a bigger, more flamboyant bloom. There are many Spencer sweet peas and they remain very popular in England and Europe. But we had no success at all. Our weather just isn't suitable. So we abandoned Spencers and switched to those developed by New Zealand's eminent flower breeder, Dr. Keith Hammett. Hammett has developed cultivars that combine weather tolerance and haunting perfume with larger size, a beautiful ruffled form and many

Top: It was the display of Spencer sweet peas in the Grand Pavilion at the Chelsea Flower Show that ignited Linda's desire for sweet peas.





Perfect posy

Thinking of growing sweet peas and don't know where to start? Join our Sweet Pea Tribe to receive a weekly email detailing exactly what to do. Compare your plants with video of the sweet peas growing in Graham and Sandra's patch, posted weekly on our private Facebook page. Call Sandra on the Garden Clinic Helpline and get the tips you need to guarantee success. Don't delay: **the Garden Clinic's Sweet Pea Tribe starts on St Patrick's Day, March 17. Call 1300 133 100.**

rich colours and patterns. 'High Scent' and 'Renaissance' are two of our favourites. 'High Scent', which is also sold as 'Hi Scent' and 'April in Paris' has an exquisite form and fragrance, as well as vase-friendly long stems. You can find it in the Mr Fothergills' Collection. We also like Yates 'Pink Diana', the 'Colourcade' mix and 'May Gibbs Sweet Pea Fairy', which is a ground-covering, pink and white bicolor. All thrive in our Sydney garden.

At the turn of the 19th century the introduction of 'Cupid', the first dwarf sweet pea, brought sweet peas into the realm of containers. This is the one to choose for hanging baskets, window boxes, pots, urns, and all other sorts of containers.

SUPPORT

Sweet peas need support. Any sunny wall or fence will do, but here are some of the popular in-garden support features:

Obelisk: Secure three or four bamboo or timber stakes in the ground and tie them at the top. 'Pea sticks' (80cm long pruning twigs with laterals) positioned around the obelisk will aid the tendrils of young seedling to grab hold.

Tepee tunnel: Use bamboo for uprights and horizontals. Tie bamboo at the top with twine. Sweet peas like clinging onto rough surfaces or metal, so tying on chicken wire or rolls of square mesh on the sides will help to maximise the tendril hold.

Arched tunnel: Arch bamboo over and tie together at 50cm intervals. Use bamboo horizontals to firm up the structure. Make sure you can walk beneath the tunnel without hitting the arched roof! Add lightweight steel mesh for climbing support.

Vertical trellis: Tack chicken wire or mesh directly onto a fence; or onto inserted stakes.

Top: sweet peas growing on a narrow teepee tunnel.

Bottom: These sweet peas are just beginning the climb up a timber obelisk.



IMAGES BY LUISA BRIMBLE AND SHUTTERSTOCK.

How to grow sweet peas

Step 1: Position

While sweet peas need plenty of sun, they do not like scorching heat. As spring weather can be variable (like the 35 degrees in September we experienced last year!) sweet peas in Sydney do best in a spot with morning sun and bright afternoon shade. Ours are in shade after 3pm. Choose a spot with good drainage.

Step 2: Preparation

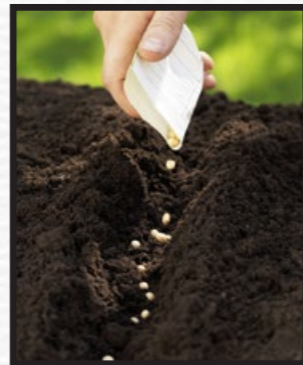
St Patrick's Day is the traditional day for planting, but there's no rush: sow seeds or plant seedlings in March, April or May. First dig deeply to loosen the soil and enrich it with a mix of mushroom compost and cow manure. Sprinkle over a handful of lime per square metre and leave for a fortnight before planting. Don't forget to set up a well-anchored trellis, fence or vertical support.

Step 3: Germination

When sowing the seed, especially in light sandy soils, it helps to scarify it first. This means rubbing a spot on the seed opposite the testa - the little white bit where the roots emerge - on a piece of glass paper. Some gardeners like to soak sweet peas overnight before planting them; others never do it and still have good results. If you do soak seeds, be sure you leave them in water



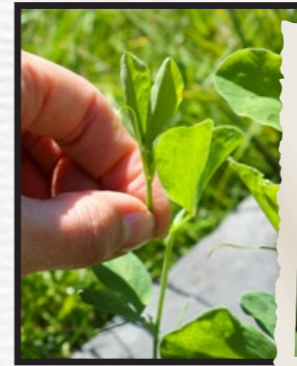
Choose morning sun



Step 3. Germination

no longer than eight hours before planting immediately.

Sow two sweet pea seeds at the base of each stake. Water with half-strength seaweed solution with a pinch of Epsom salts added to the watering can. Do not water again until seeds germinate (and pray for dry weather!). Seeds that don't germinate within two weeks have probably rotted. Sow some more, they'll quickly catch up.



Step 6. Protection

Step 4: Pinching out

Once the seedling is about 10cm, with three or four leaf pairs already grown, pinch out the leader (the growing tip). Pinch it out with your thumb and forefinger to reduce the seedling to 5cm in height. This will encourage vigorous side shoots and the plant will put more energy in growth out not up.

Step 5: Feeding

Avoid using too much fertiliser (particularly high-nitrogen feeds) or plants will produce lush green leaves but very few flowers. Once the buds form, encourage flowering with a regular application of liquid flower fertiliser, such as Thrive Flower & Fruit, Harvest, Nutrafeed or Powerfeed.

Step 6: Protecting

Sweet pea seedlings are very attractive to birds, slugs and snails, so protect them throughout the winter. If you see signs of powdery mildew, spray immediately with Rose Gun, EcoRose or EcoFungicide.

Step 7: Picking

Keep sweet pea vines mulched and well watered for good flower production. Once they start to produce, be sure to pick stems every other day to prevent seedpods maturing. The more you pick, the more new flowers the plants will develop.



Sandra ties sweet peas onto trellis



Pick flowers every second day to encourage more blooms.

The perfect posy