

SWEET SUCCESS



Dr Keith Hammett's sweet pea variety Harbinger is an early bloomer with large, frilly flowers.

light standard and darker wings and keel in pink, purple, orange and blue.

"Thirty-odd years ago I saw a type of pea (*Pisum elatius*) where the standard petal is paler than the wing petals," he says. "As *Pisum* is related to sweet pea (*Lathyrus*), I wondered whether it might be possible to produce reverse bicolor sweet peas. As this characteristic did not exist in sweet peas, I worked incrementally towards that end."

Maloy, one of his most successful reverse bicolor sweet peas, has been released this month in Australia by Mr Fothergill's.

Other varieties

The other new releases are Harbinger, Pandemonium and Erewhon.

Harbinger is an early blooming cultivar with the maroon and violet colouring of the original wild sweet pea in large frilly flowers.

Pandemonium is a "flaked" sweet pea, which means the dark cerise pigmentation occurs as splashes on a pale background colour, while Erewhon is a reverse bicolor on the blue side of the spectrum.

"I named it after the 19th-century novel by Samuel Butler, which is often credited as being the first science-fiction work," Dr Hammett says. "This work was stimulated by his visit to New Zealand where the seasons and everything else seemed to him to be reversed (Erewhon is "nowhere" spelt backwards). It flowers in summer."

But Dr Hammett says the most significant thing about Erewhon is that unlike nearly all sweet peas since the plant was introduced to cultivation in 1699, it is a hybrid.

Working with a colleague at the University of Auckland, Dr Hammett hybridised the garden sweet pea (*Lathyrus odoratus*) with the recently discovered *Lathyrus belinensis* from Turkey. The hybrids are named in his honour as *Lathyrus x hammettii*. However, he is not resting there – his new challenge is to breed a yellow sweet pea.



ON THE WING

WITH DON KNOWLER

On Lygon St in the oppressive Melbourne summer heat, I saw what could be the shape of things to come in terms of urban wildlife. A raven, panting with beak open, tiptoed across a hot tin roof to drink putrid water from a gutter above a restaurant and in the only park within sight, a magpie-lark stabbed at souvlaki wrapping.

I forsake the woods around my Dynnyrne home once a year for inner Melbourne, usually to spend a few days at the Australian Open. But I never switch off from birds and am drawn to those that call the city home.

In past years, I've discovered welcome swallows darting among the cornflowers in an urban garden close to the Yarra River, and a night heron hunting the banks of the river, amid the trendy night-life of Southbank.

This year, my wildlife experience was confined to the few hectares of Argyle Square midway along the famous Carlton St restaurant strip. Although an internet guide described it as a haven for birds that "seek refuge in its trees", it provided slim pickings for the bird-watcher.

All the same, the tinny call of the magpie-lark told me I was in an Australian city far from my own, as did the strident caw of the little raven, replacing Hobart's urban crow family member, the forest raven.

The only other native birds I saw were silver gulls, a lone magpie and rainbow lorikeets. I won't even count the ubiquitous hill mynas, introduced pests from India that have come to dominate the streetscapes of Australian cities – but thankfully not Hobart.

Introduced trees and shrubs also dominated in Argyle Square, save for a few sugar gums, but I do not have a problem with exotic trees in open spaces planned in Victorian times – such as the square's elms, London planes and cherries – because they are part of Australia's historic urban fabric.

I have quoted research in the past revealing parks and trees in cities blunt the brutality of glass and concrete, and so are beneficial to the mental health of city-dwellers. Not only do trees and flowers bring tranquility to our busy lives, they also provide a haven for native birds and smaller mammals, together with plants.

I read recently of a movement in Britain aimed at not so much advocating the planning and planting of new parks, but ensuring existing ones are preserved.

There has been much debate in Hobart over urban planning – especially the height of new buildings – but little attention appears to have been given to open spaces.

With planning initiatives, we have a choice in our cities between the anguished, raucous cry of a thirsty raven or more soothing sounds – such as the tinkling song of the scarlet robin.

Developing a new plant variety can take a long time. The packets of sweet peas I am going to plant in my garden this autumn represent a lifetime of work for Dr Keith Hammett, who has been breeding sweet peas for more than 60 years – initially in England and for the past 50 years in his adopted home New Zealand.

"I started breeding sweet peas as a teenager and from the outset used ancestral cultivars, which were much more strongly scented than exhibition cultivars available at that time," he says. "As a consequence, most of the stuff I have raised is considered to have good scent."

Indeed, High Scent, one of his first named sweet pea varieties, is considered worldwide to be the benchmark cultivar for sweet pea scent.

New colour breaks

As well as concentrating on fragrance, Dr Hammett's sweet pea flowers are large, frilled and distinctively coloured. The colour combinations turned tradition on its head.

To appreciate his achievements, a little explanation of sweet pea floral morphology is necessary. Each sweet pea flower has five petals – one is large and upright and known as the "standard", while the others form the base of the flower and hold the male (stamens) and female (pistil) parts. These are the two "wings" and "keel", which is made up of two fused petals.

In two-toned or bicolor sweet peas, the wings and keel are lighter in colour than the large standards. Using careful breeding from a flower where the typical colouration was reversed, Dr Hammett bred flowers with a

SEEDS IN SHORT SUPPLY

The pretty packets of Dr Keith Hammett's sweet peas conceal a worldwide crisis in the industry. Seeds are produced around the world but growers in California and Tasmania are no longer producing sweet pea seeds, which are now mainly grown in China. Dr Hammett also grows and sells seeds for his own varieties via mail order from his website drkeithhammett.co.nz

HOW TO GROW SWEET PEAS

Sweet pea seeds are sown in autumn and spring for flowers from winter to summer. They grow best in full sun, in slightly alkaline

soil enriched with well-rotted manure, and need a tall trellis to support their growth.

SWEET PEA GIVEAWAY

Enter our competition to win one of six packs of Mr Fothergill's sweet pea seeds, including Dr Hammett's Maloy, Pandemonium, Harbinger and Erewhon, as well as Tiller Girls and Nimbus. To win, email tas.weekend@news.com.au with "Sweet pea giveaway" in the subject line and your name, address and contact number in the email body. Entries close at 5pm on Wednesday.



Quiz Answers: 1. Ricky Martin 2. South Australia 3. 2006 4. Milk or cream 5. Renault 6. Baltic Sea 7. United Kingdom 8. False (Barbra Streisand) 9. Lisa Wilkinson 10. Robert McClelland 11. *The Prophet* 12. Alastair Cook 13. Wilhelm Klink 14. Europe 15. Hopscotch 16. W. Somerset Maugham 17. One 18. Utah 19. Ariana Grande 20. True 21. Los Angeles 22. Goji berries 23. Soccer 24. Trombone 25. Bilbo Baggins 26. Blue, yellow 27. Sugar 28. South America 29. *Godspell* 30. Bridal Veil Falls, American Falls, Horseshoe Falls

Target Word Answers: 9 letter words extortion 7 letter words tortoni 6 letter words enroot, extort, intort, norite, orient, rotten, tinter, tonier, tooter, triton 5 letter words inert, inter, nitre, nitro, otter, tenor, titer, titre, toner, torte, toter, toxin, trine, trite 4 letter words exit, into, next, nite, note, onto, otto, rent, riot, rite, rote, tent, tern, text, tier, tine, tint, tire, tiro, tone, toot, tore, tori, torn, tort, tote, tret, trio, trot.