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**GROWING**  
GUIDE

## Success with *Sweet peas*

Get stunning results easily by sowing these sweetly-scented beauties NOW



**Colin Hambidge**

GARDEN  
WRITER

and exhibitors sowed their seed back in the autumn, excellent results can easily be achieved from sowing now or in March.

A STEADY SUPPLY of beautiful, sweetly-scented sweet peas to enjoy in the garden and cut for the house is the height of summer gardening for many of us. While the keenest sweet pea growers and

Sowing in early spring is ideal if you don't want to care for seedlings all through the winter, especially when local conditions are harsh.

And it has the real advantage that the seedlings are easier to manage because they grow steadily as the days lengthen and turn into summer.

Spring-sown plants will be a little later into flower, but it's always worth the wait!

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## How to grow your sweet peas

**ALTHOUGH THEIR BLOOMS** look exotic, sweet peas are hardy annuals and can be sown direct in their flowering positions, just like other annuals such as calendula, nigella and sunflower. Wait until March or when the soil starts to warm up before making a direct sowing, as seed sown into cold, wet soil will probably rot before it can germinate.

A safer and more reliable method is to make a

sowing 'under glass' in February or March. Do not be deterred by this term. Somewhere light and airy, such as a windowsill, conservatory or an unheated greenhouse is all that is needed to get sweet peas into life.

In an unheated greenhouse, cover seedlings with fleece or newspaper if frost threatens until the young plants become established.

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## tips for success with spring-sown sweet peas

### Go Step by step



Sow your free 'Floral Tribute' seeds



**1** Part-fill a 12cm (5in) plastic pot with good quality compost and level the surface.



**2** Space five to seven seeds out before covering with another 1cm (½in) depth of compost.



**3** Water the pot so the compost is thoroughly moist and allow to drain. Don't water again until you see seedlings appear.

**1** Sow five to seven seeds per 12cm (5in) pot of John Innes seed compost, John Innes No 1 potting compost or multi-purpose compost, covering seeds with 1cm (½in) of compost. For the best results, sow in Rootainers, specially designed for long-rooted plants. Do not sow sweet pea seed in standard trays, as these are too shallow and will prevent essential root development.

### Can germination be improved?

Much has been written on this subject, and opinion remains divided. My own view is that the majority of varieties and mixtures will give 90 per cent plus germination without any additional assistance. Some recommend 'chipping' or the removal of a small part of the seed coat opposite the 'eye' to allow it to take up water more readily, but this has to be done carefully or the seed will be ruined.

Others soak mottled or black-seeded varieties in water overnight before sowing, but this can cause stress and actually prevent germination.

While I am not sure it improves germination rates, some enthusiasts like to sow their seed between a few layers of damp kitchen roll before taking them away as they sprout and potting them on individually.



**2** Water the pots thoroughly and allow to drain before placing them in the windowsill or greenhouse. Do not water them again until seedlings start to appear, often seven to 14 days after sowing.



**3** When the seedlings have developed two pairs of true leaves, pinch out the tips, to encourage sideshoots and bushy plants. At this stage, windowsill plants can be moved somewhere a little cooler, as too much warmth now may result in 'leggy' growth. Those in the greenhouse can stay where they are.



**4** In early March, fork over a strip of garden 1m (3ft 4in) wide, removing weeds and breaking down all clods until the soil becomes finer and crumbly to the touch. It's what old gardeners used to call a 'fine tilth'!



**5** Insert a double row of 2.4m (8ft) tall bamboo canes into the soil, each 45cm (18in) apart in the row and about 60cm (2ft) between the rows. Make sure each cane slopes inwards to the other row so additional canes can be interwoven where the two rows meet at the top and tied together for maximum rigidity.



**6** Cover the rows with nylon pea and bean netting, available from garden centres, securing it to the canes with string or ties.



**7** From mid-March, tap the plants out of their pots, gently tease them apart and plant individually at intervals of 20cm (8in) along each row. Stick a few short twigs in front of the plants to protect against bird damage.



**8** Water the plants regularly in dry spells and encourage them to grow up their supports by weaving them through the netting. They will soon be doing it with no help at all.



**9** Once the plants start to flower in early summer, keep picking the blooms daily and do not let them to fade and set seed. If this happens, the plant's work is done and it produces no more blooms. Keep picking and you will keep getting flowers.



**10** Regular feeding every few days with a general-purpose soluble fertiliser will give the flowering plants a further encouragement to keep blooming.

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Choosing varieties

**WE MAY WELL** look back on the 20th century as a golden age of sweet pea breeding, with many superb new varieties introduced by talented amateur hybridists such as Bernard Jones and Ken Colledge, and families such as the Unwins and Boltons, who not only bred new strains, but also made a living from selling the seed.

Bernard Jones, a pharmacist by profession, gave us 'The Doctor', 'Red Arrow', 'White Supreme' and most famously, 'Mrs Bernard Jones', while Ken Colledge, a priest, was responsible for 'Leamington', 'Southbourne', 'Diamond Wedding' and 'Terry Wogan'. The advantage sweet peas have over many flowers is that because they do not naturally cross-pollinate, they don't need to be grown in isolation, so several varieties can be grown in a fair-sized garden, allowing the breeder to make their own crosses.

Charles Unwin, whose father William established the Cambridgeshire seed company, took a lively interest in sweet peas from a young age, developing a flair for breeding good new varieties. His successes include 'Frances Perry', the uniquely-coloured 'Champagne Bubbles' and 'Andrew Unwin', the last one he bred and named for his grandson. After his death in 1986, the good work was carried on at Unwins by David Kerley, who bred notable varieties such as 'Daphne', 'Gwendoline' and 'Queen Mother'.

Founded at much the same time in Lancashire before moving to Birdbrook in Essex, Boltons was also a famous name in sweet peas throughout the 20th century. 'Southampton', 'Elizabeth Taylor' and 'Mrs R Bolton' are among their best known introductions. The company was eventually taken over by Unwins.

Nowadays, few would argue the



GO TO PAGE 60 FOR OUR EXCLUSIVE SWEET PEA OFFER



Ruffled, fragrant pale peach flowers of 'Champagne Bubbles'



'Sir Henry Cecil' is sweetly scented, with maroon-rippled flowers



Large, frilly pink-flaked blooms of 'Pandemonium'



Salmon pink 'Queen Mother'

pre-eminent breeder of sweet peas is Dr Keith Hammett, an Englishman who has lived and worked in New Zealand for many years. Year after year, his stunning new varieties are introduced to British gardeners via the seed catalogues.

His 'Erewhon', named after a novel by Samuel Butler, is a beautiful reverse bi-color in the old-fashioned, small-flowered, but well-perfumed grandiflora style, while the recently introduced 'Sir Henry Cecil' and 'Pandemonium' are two of the finest 'flakes' from Hammett. His latest introduction is the crimson and cerise bi-colour 'Jimelda', named for husband and wife actors Jim Carter and Imelda Staunton.



'Mrs Bernard Jones' was named after its pharmacist breeder's wife



Highly-scented lavender blooms of 'Leamington'



Peachy-pink 'Mrs R Bolton' has stood the test of time



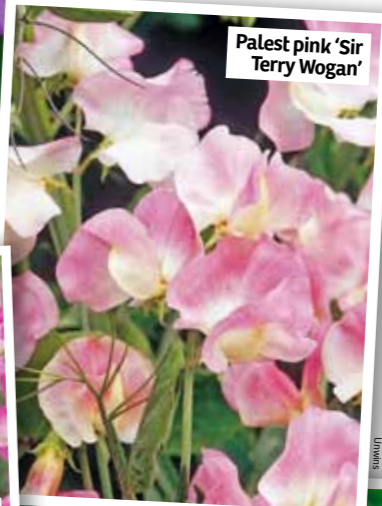
Bi-coloured 'Erewhon' has great scent and is superb for cutting



Try 'Diamond Wedding' for pure white flowers



Magenta 'Gwendoline'



Palest pink 'Sir Terry Wogan'



'Daphne' has perfect long-stemmed blooms - great for exhibiting



Scarlet sweet peas make a statement, and 'Red Arrow' is one of the best

How are sweet peas bred?

**F**IRST DECIDE ON two parents, with good characteristics you hope they can pass to their offspring. The male and female organs are in each flower, ready to function simultaneously. The male stamens have anthers, which release pollen when ripe. The female pistil comprises the stigma, style and ovary, and is revealed if you take away the petals and keel.

The stigma is sticky with fine hairs underneath. The style leads to the ovary, the immature seed pod. Pollen transfers to the stigma and into the ovary where it fertilises one of the ovules or immature seeds.

As sweet peas self-pollinate, the breeder needs to beat them to it by introducing pollen from

the other selected parent. The flower to be pollinated must have its anthers removed before they shed pollen, thereby emasculating what has become the female parent. Pollen is then taken from a half-open bloom of the chosen male parent, by pulling down the keel to reveal the stamen and pollen. It can be transferred to the female either by direct contact or by using a small, fine-haired artist's brush.

All other buds on the same stem as the pollinated flower should be removed and a label attached with a unique reference number and details of the cross logged. Hopefully seed will set, which can be grown on and the resulting seedlings inspected to see if a worthwhile new variety can be isolated and grown on further.

Have modern sweet peas lost their scent?

Some celebrity gardeners who should know better maintain modern varieties no longer have any scent. This is totally untrue. Just sniff some of Keith Hammett's latest introductions to dispel this myth. True, those Victorian grandifloras had powerful fragrance, but today we still have strongly-scented sweet peas, plus the bonus of larger flowers and longer stems.



Suppliers

- Mr Fothergill's, tel: 0845 371 0518; [www.mr-fothergills.co.uk](http://www.mr-fothergills.co.uk)
- Kings Seeds, tel: 01376 570000; [www.kingsseeds.com](http://www.kingsseeds.com)
- Suttons, tel: 0844 922 0606; [www.suttons.co.uk](http://www.suttons.co.uk)
- Unwins, tel: 0844 573 8400; [www.unwins.co.uk](http://www.unwins.co.uk)