

Growing Sweet Peas

The Sweet Pea, or *Lathyrus odoratus*, to give it its botanical name, is a genus of about 150 species grown as a cut flower for its pronounced scent and lovely coloured blooms. Sweet peas are very easy to grow from seed and a few plants will give a daily bunch of flowers from July to the first frosts.

Sowing

Seeds can be sown anytime between October and the end of March. To ensure success sow a few seeds at intervals in favourable weather conditions between January and the end of February, so ideally you have germinated seeds by the first week of March for flowering in early July.

Use a full depth pot of 7mm (2 seeds) to 12mm diameter (5 seeds) and a good quality multipurpose or John Innes No1 compost. **“Do not use last year’s left over bag” is the warning from research organisations such as the RHS or Which? The reason is the rapid deterioration of low peat content composts and the increased amount of undesirable by-products potentially harmful to plant growth.**

Place seeds about 1cm or ½” deep; cover seeds with compost and water well. Put in a cool place such as a cold frame, greenhouse, or outside in a sheltered position. Germination may take from 10 to 35 days depending on weather conditions. Seeds can be covered at this stage, but must be removed once germination starts. Beware of mice as they love these seeds. Seeds can also be grown on a window sill, but must be given maximum light when germinated as they will elongate to long straggly stems very quickly. Do not water again until germination appears to be finished. Grow on slowly without heat, but protected from frost to give strong young growth. When about 4-5 true leaves have formed, the top and side shoots can be pinched out. This can delay flowering but does give a much stronger plant. This can be done at planting-out time when weather is favourable and plants have been properly hardened off.

Plant out in soil containing plenty of compost and fertilizers as sweet peas are avid feeders and the roots prefer plenty of moisture. Insert an eight foot cane for each plant and grow as a cordon; that is, keep stem straight and fairly tight to the cane. The stem will need tying in about every 6 inches or so, which can mean every third day. Sweet peas are often grown in a pyramid of about 5-8 plants. If growing in pots after germination plant into an 8-10 inch pot with 5-8 plants. Growing this way will require more watering and feeding with half-strength tomato feed at every watering

When plants are growing strongly ensure you give enough fertilizer and moisture. At this stage, check for any pest such as greenfly and remove. Spraying with water containing a little washing up liquid usually works if caught at early stage. Remove any early malformed blooms and the tendrils.

The first flush of flowers is the best with long straight stems and 3 or more blooms per stem. Pick the flowers on the day of the show when the stems are full of sap keeping the stems as long as possible. Plunge the stems but not flowers into cold water. Arrange the five stems in a fairly narrow necked vase either as a fan or with three at the back and two in the front. Now sit back and enjoy the scent and flowers.

Good Growing!

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