

SWEET PEAS
for Gather
by Grace Alexander

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Through Gather, I publish growing guides for our favourite flowers as well as digital, seasonal journals, capturing the changing seasons in flowers, landscapes, food and forms. If you would like to see the other Gather digital books, please go to the Gather Library.

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Contents

- / p. 05 :
Why I love sweet peas

- / p. 07 :
01 · What sweet peas to grow

- / p. 41 :
02 · When to sow

- / p. 44::
03 · Starting sweet pea seed

- / p. 49 :
04 · Planting out

- / p. 52 :
05 · Courtyards & containers

- / p. 54 :
06 · Cutting & conditioning

- / p. 56 :
07 · Saving seed

- / p. 58 :
08 · Mistakes people make

PREFACE

Sweet peas are one of those magical flowers.

The scent alone merits their inclusion in any garden, whatever size or inclination, and the fact that you can sow them in the darkest days of late winter makes them all the more special. If you are thoroughly over the gloom and dreaming of spring (and I know I am), then sowing sweet peas will gift you a lift and hope.

A few hours with your hands in soil is likely to be just the thing.



WHAT SWEET PEAS TO SOW

I grew sweet peas for years before I worked out the differences between all the different sorts. I just chose and grew the colours I liked. If I am honest, I still do.

However, if you are particularly fussed about growing a particular shape or you want them at a particular time, then I suggest a little research into the different sorts is merited.

If not, skip this bit and just grow the ones that catch your eye.

The originals, or the Old-Fashioneds

The first known sweet peas date back to the 16th century. I always thought that it was sweet peas that were

responsible for Gregor Mendel finding out about dominant and recessive genes in his monastery, but it turns out that that was just common or garden peas. (Do not get the two mixed up; sweet pea seed and pods are toxic.) And it seems that sweet peas set off to take over the world before that anyway. Some were sent from the Sicilian monk, Franciscus Cupani, to Britain (hence the name of the oldest variety, 'Cupani') and a handful of different colours became popular in gardens here.

You can still get the seed for these small, highly scented varieties from a number of suppliers but they will generally be lumped in with the heirloom grandifloras. I don't grow many of them because of how small and how short their stems are, but I



have had the odd 'Cupani' over the years and they truly can completely fill a room with their scent.

Grandifloras

But people will meddle, and in 1888, Henry Eckford got seriously into breeding and improving the old varieties. He managed to increase the flower size and vastly increase the number of different colours through his endeavours. These became known as the 'grandiflora' sweet peas.

Slightly misleadingly, as the flowers are nothing like as grand as on a Spencer, but for its time, they were a big improvement on the heirlooms and a huge proportion of the sweet peas with which you are familiar and which you will see around, are these grandiflora.

However, these are not modern grandiflora (see below) and sometimes they will be called 'heirlooms' to mark them out as the older ones.

My favourites are Flora Norton (new to me last year, and adorable) and I am trying the rather striking Henry

Eckford. It's orange, but I felt I should because I don't think we would have sweet peas like we do if it weren't for him.

Also try:

/Lord Nelson

/ Prince of Orange

/Prince Edward of York.

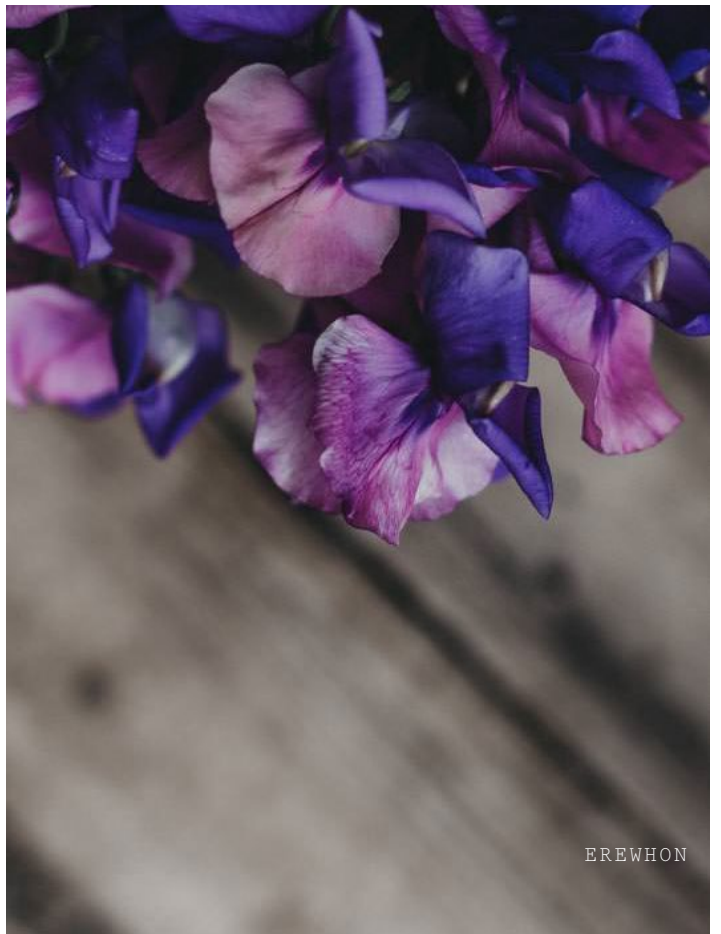
You can tell that the tradition of naming flowers after people was strong back then.

The Spencers

Yes, as in Diana Spencer. Their name comes from her family, the Spencers of Althorp House, as it was their head gardener, Silas Cole, who first exhibited the sweet pea 'Countess Spencer' in 1901.

This was larger and frillier than anything else at the time and Spencers remain the prize specimens of the sweet pea world. Huge.

You want big, showy blooms that could win a medal at your local agricultural show? Pick a Spencer. Some say they are too big, and they have lost the



shape that defines the pea flower. One famous gardener has gone so far as to say they are less a flower and more a pair of frilly knickers.

I am not of this critical mind, and is it any surprise that the ultimate sweet pea, 'Piggy Sue' is a Spencer? It shouldn't be. Goodness, she is an aristocratic sort of flower. I also find that she blooms prolifically, even better than my Modern Grandifloras.

The other criticism levelled at Spencers. Little scent. Again, I am not sure I agree that this should be held against them because they are scented, and in my eyes, they are scented enough, although I will concede that they cannot complete with one of the olds.

Also, want an earlier flower? Pick a Modern Grandiflora; Spencers are often known as 'late Spencers' as they tend to flower up to a month later than all the others.

A side note. One of my sweet pea gurus warned me to be careful with Spencers. They have been subject to

a lot of crossing and poor breeding practices over the years and some varieties have kept their big blousy blooms better than others. I was told to keep my eye out for 'premium Spencers' which were sure to not disappoint.

Great Spencers to grow:

- / Betty Maiden
- / Charlie's Angel (seriously blousy)
- / Dusty Springfield
- / Jilly
- / Mollie Rilstone
- / Nimbus

I am also trying Heaven Scent this year as it promises apricot tones which I adore. I'll keep you posted.

Modern Grandiflora

Ah, the best of both worlds.

Modern grandifloras have all the glorious beauty and fragrance of the heirloom grandifloras with the long, strait, cuttable stems of the Spencers.

More blooms per stem, and what gorgeous blooms they are. They are

still a little smaller than the true spencers, but what they may be perceived to lack in size (and it is all relative, but exhibitors of sweet peas as shows are notoriously snobby about modern grandifloras) they make up for in scent and elegance. Also, these ones are incredibly easy and forgiving to grow.

Lots of the ones I grow and sell and love are modern grandifloras:

- / Albutt Blue
- / April in Paris
- / Cream Eggs
- / Erewhon
- / Juliet
- / Watermelon.

Early sweet peas

For the ambitious and the adventurous. Rachel from Green & Gorgeous has some seed if you want to give these a try.

These are multiflora (lots of florets spread down the stem) types of Sweet Pea which will flower on shorter day lengths because they are not triggered into blooming by day length as other sweet peas are.

I am attempting these for the first time this year. However, I think the general advice is that they need the warmth of a polytunnel (which I don't have) to do well because they come on so early in the year, so it might be a bit of a gamble.

I will see if I can fit a tall tub in the greenhouse, just for the novelty of sweet peas in April.

Here are my absolute favourites...

ANNIVERSARY

Spencer variety

Pink edge on white ground

English Sweet Peas sent me a little parcel of these alongside a bumper order, so I thought I would give them a try. The white ground (background colour) means that they are a cooler shade of pink than Piggy Sue, and the pink is broader than a true picotee. Don't be fooled by any description that says it opens cream, the ones I have absolutely don't. However, the banner petal is pinker than the wing petal and the keel which gives it a rather lovely texture, The backs of the banner flowers are even better; turn them around to appreciate the veining.

Long, straight stems. Heady scent. Ruffled petals.



BETTY MAIDEN

Spencer variety

Lilac edge & veining on white ground

A lovely old-fashioned sweet pea. The wing petals wrap around the keel giving them a very ruffled and exuberant look. The colour is the extra-special bit of Betty though; both a picotee edging and veining, especially pretty from the back,

Long, straight stems. Abundant, even in hot years.





CHARLIE'S ANGEL

Spencer variety - RHS AGM

Big ruffled lavender blue

Charlie's Angel is popular for a reason; it is generous in terms of the number of blooms, and each one is big and ruffled. The banner petal reflex slightly, giving them even more volume.

The colour is at the softer end of blue (very different to Our Harry, but more like Chelsea Centenary), with the keel being slightly paler than the rest of the flower. Like many sweet peas, it fades slightly as it ages, taking on a silver sheen. very slight veining on close examination.

Long, straight stems. Incredible scent.



CHELSEA CENTENARY

Multiflora spencer variety
Pale blue with a silver picotee on opening

Milli Proust recommended these to me and oh my goodness, they are a different level. Firstly, the stems just grow and grow and grow - I have had some up to forty centimetres. Secondly, each flower is spaced out along the stem, and they just keep coming. I think the record is fifteen flowers to a stem, although mine reached about twelve and then more tendrils and vines started growing out of the end of the flower stem, and it all started again.

Keep feeding, these are even hungrier than the usual sweet peas because they are just so beefy.



EARL GREY

Bi-colour flake

Purple on banner, blue on wing

Earl Grey is a large flowered spencer type sweet pea with two tone flaked petals. Flaked varieties have colour on both sides of the petals that radiate from the middle out to the edges, as if painted with a brush. Usually, this is a single colour on a white background (Nimbus is purple for example) but Earl Grey is one colour on the banner petal (a warm deep purple) and another on the wing (blue). Both colour start to fade to a perfect silver as it ages.

I don't find Earl Grey to be the most abundant bloomer or the most enthusiastic grower. I still grow it though, because it is so incredibly pretty.

NB. Senator is very similar, but the banner petals are deep red, rather than purple.



EREWHON

*Fancy Bi-Colour variety
Lilac banners and purple wings*

Erewhon is a rather magical sweet pea. The wing petals are slightly folded at the edges which give them a neat and tidy look, added to by the fact that these are much smaller than the big, ruffled Spencers. The keel inside the flower is already pale, and the whole flower pales to a silver as it gets old.

The back bears inspection too; the lilac banners have a little of the purple veining at the base.

Four flowers per stem. Good scent, although I find it to be rather softer than the Spencers. .



HEAVEN SCENT

Spencer variety

Pink, starting with an apricot hue

One of those sweet peas that is barely recognisable as the same variety at the beginning and the end of its flowering. Many describe Heaven Scent as apricot but, much as I would adore an apricot sweet pea, I cannot in all honesty say that it is. In the very early stages, it has a rather vintage blush tone, but it soon fades and the flower is a rather unapologetic bubblegum pink. The keel and the very base of the petals stay white though, which does add a rather dazzling ombre sense to it.

Darker than Anniversary. Lighter than Watermelon.



JULIET

Modern grandiflora variety

Neat cream flowers, with a slight blush

Juliet is a wonderful sweet pea. The wing petals are almost the same size as the banner petals and perky. This means that the keel is visible and the whole bloom has a neat and upright silhouette. That's not why I like it though, I grow it for its colour. The colour of the pages in an old book, the colour of a silk wedding dress at a Parisian wedding, the colour of cream from a cow who has been eating marigolds.

Smaller flowers, so grow more plants.



MISS WILLMOTT

Grandiflora variety
Coral & salmon heirloom

Named after the wonderful Ellen Willmott, I nearly pulled this out and threw it away because it started off neon pink. I am glad I didn't though, because it has now grown on me and I can't get enough.

A very small flower but packing a great punch, the banner petals turn a smoked salmon colour, whilst the wings remain shocking pink. As the colours start to fade, the veining becomes more visible and the whole bloom appears textured.

Smaller flower than Watermelon, and a slightly more saturated pink. Similar to the Spencer, Maloy.



NIMBUS

Spencer variety

Flake

One of the great sweet peas in my book. A dark purple flake on silvery grey background, it fades to an inky blue/black as it ages. I find it grows with very ruffled wing petals which makes it look elegant but textural. The banners are upright and slightly folded back.

Very vigorous grower with long stems, especially for a flake.



OUR HARRY

Spencer variety
One of the best blues

Our Harry really does stand out as one of the clearest blues. In the sweet pea world, the word 'blue' often means lilac which is all rather confusing. I would say this one is a blue though. Like all Spencers, the flowers are big and frilly and so they do pack a punch.

Trouble-free but keep tying them in to make sure the stems stay strong and straight, I find there is the potential for this one to flop without good support.



PIGGY SUE

Spencer variety

Blush pink edges on cream ground

The ultimate in sweet peas. If I could only grow one sweet pea, or even one flower, it would be this one. Exceptionally abundant. Long, straight stems and an absolutely unique soft blush colour.

One of the earliest flowering of the Spencers, there are up to six blooms per stem, and buckets and buckets of stems per plant.





RENOWN

Spencer variety

Deep ruby red

An unexpected hit of my season, I bought and sowed this on a whim and I absolutely adored it from the moment it flowered. A deep, rich red which I simply can't do justice to with a camera, you have to see it to believe it



WHEN TO SOW

This depends on whether you want beefy, exhibition level sweet pea blooms. If this is the case, the answer is easy. Sow a Spencer in late October or early November, grow it on hard, plant it out on the last day of February, feed it, and it will flower its socks off when the day length gets to the right level (no-one seems to know exactly what this is, but it roughly translates into the end of May, early June if you are in the UK).

I am not growing for show; I am growing for my bedside table, possibly a supper party, and for the scent. And so, this is my sweet pea schedule.

Like so many of the best flowers, sow little and sow often. The flowering season of each plant can be stretched a bit with diligent picking, cooler weather, and the odd decent feed, but generally, I would suggest some good old successional sowing.

My sowing schedule goes something like:

The first sow

October. The fire being lit for the first time is a good sign that the nights are cold, and the house is warm. The sown seed goes in a warm place but as soon as they are up and sprouting, they go outside to a cold greenhouse or a cold frame.

Remember this last bit; it is absolutely the key to having strong plants that last through winter and burst into growth in the spring. Warm start. Cold growing on.

The Festive sow

By the time the in-laws have left, I require a little solitude and solace. I am also unlikely to be using the cooker for a few days as the fridge is full of leftovers and I have already eaten my bodyweight in sprouts and

bread sauce. The lid of the Everhot is therefore available for providing the sweet peas with a little bottom heat. (Everhots are much cooler than Aga's and give off a much gentler heat. A little bottom heat is a good thing, but don't cook the poor things.) As above, as soon as they are up, out they go.

The February one, or the one that I generally forget

This one is more a nice to have than an essential, and the chances are the previous sowings are already looking strong and healthy and I am already worrying that I am going to run out of space in the greenhouse. However, it is good to plan for this one because of mice. There is little that can go wrong with germinating and growing sweet peas (they are terribly straightforward in the main) but the one thing that can catch you out is mice. I used to think that, once the seeds had germinated and the goodness gone from the seed into the shooting growth, the mice would lose interest. However, I don't know if they were especially hungry last year, but I saw enough horror stories of ravaged seedlings to not be so confident in the future. If you have

suffered sad losses from the previous two sowings, February is a good time to regroup and try again.

The last gasp

I frequently have sweet peas going into September. Partly because I grow a lot of sweet pea plants, and partly because I cannot resist a May sowing. I have got all my annuals done and my seed sowing fingers are itching. One last throw of the sweet pea dice. Just a few. Just because they look extra special amongst mists and heavy dews. Oh ok, I just do it to show off really.

This is often a poor choice because sweet peas are meant to hate the heat of high summer. Mine don't seem to mind, and Indigo King positive thrives on it, but maybe that's because Somerset rarely gets that hot.

You may have noticed that, even in the most fecund stage of spring, I never suggested direct sowing. You are, in my experience, simply feeding mice very expensive food if you do that. I always start mine indoors and keep them protected with wire mesh for as long as I can.



'Eclipse'

STARTING SWEET PEA SEED

You will need:

- / Peat-free compost. Not the seed compost, a good multi-purpose.
- / Cardboard inners or, if you are going to reuse, good quality plastic root trainers.
- / A container to hold the inners, one of those plastic trays that mushrooms come in is perfect
- / Labels & a soft pencil
- / Seed

There is a bit of a debate about pre-soaking seeds before sowing and, like so many of these gardening dichotomies, it inspires strong feelings in some.

Not in me, I hold a pragmatic view. If the seed is over a year old and looks a bit wrinkled, soak it. If they are plump and look smooth and round,

they probably don't need it. The initial watering will suffice.

Fill your tubes or root trainers with good quality compost. Sweet peas produce tap roots, so they do need a bit of depth underneath them. This is why cardboard tubes or root trainers are better than small pots, but the deeper 9cm pots can be used if that is what you have.

I always used to say sow two seeds per tube because most sweet peas germinate at around 65%. However, my seed has proven to be so good, I think I am going to say one seed for each tube.

Sweet peas do like space and I am never going to thin out a perfectly healthy sweet pea seedling. I am just not that person.



It is important to make sure the seed is not buried too deep. You are aiming for about a centimetre. I find dibbing with a pencil and dropping the seed in is incredible satisfying, but it is hard to keep track of the depth and everything sinks again when you water.

Filling with compost to very nearly the top and then adding the seed and covering is safer in terms of knowing how deep they are, but also doesn't compact the compost.

Label

Label each of the tubes unless every single tube in the container is the same variety. I know, I have tried to get around this will saying that 'from this row is Jilly', or 'this is half Nimbus and half Burnished Bronze'. I promise you that when spring arrives, all this means is that you have a lot of identical, unidentifiable plants.

Water once

Water very gently but very, very thoroughly. When I say gently, the water will bounce out of the container and splash everywhere, particularly

when the compost is dry. Do it in a sink or outside.

I haven't found a way of doing this without water spurting off in strange directions so I just accept that it will and take precautions. The first water should be a comprehensive one as it takes the place of the soaking step that we have missed out (if you have) and there needs to be enough moisture in the compost to soften the seed coating.

It bears repeating; the mantra to remember for most seeds, but particularly sweet peas, is warm and dark for germination, cool and light for growing on. Around 15 degrees Celsius is about right according to the experts but I think a kitchen windowsill, or any place out of a draft indoors, is fine. Keep them moist but not wet.

Leggy is not a good look

Once the shoots are up and through, get them out in the cold. If you molly coddle them, you get weak, leggy plants. A cold greenhouse, a cold frame, or just in a sheltered spot with

some protection from mice, will keep them happy.

Remember to keep them moist but not wet over the winter.

If they start to yellow or look like they are struggling, you can use a little seaweed in the water or, a better idea, put the whole tube (or plant if you are using root trainers) into a bigger pot with fresh compost. Autumn sown plants will definitely need this. Later sowings might be ok going directly into the ground in their tubes.

Once the plants are 4–6 inches tall, pinch out the central growing tip, just above a leaf joint, leaving just two or three leaf nodes. This will encourage the plant to branch vigorously from the base.



'Valerie Harrod'

PLANTING OUT

Hopefully, your sweet peas have made it through the winter, and they are starting to put on a bit of growth in the spring.

You will probably have realised that you have grown far too many and now you need to decide where to put them. There are generally two questions at this stage. Ground or pot? How are you going to support them?

Sweet peas are surprisingly hardy so, although the advice is generally to wait until the last frost, it doesn't matter if you time this a bit wrong. Obviously wait for the soil to start warming. A fresh rash of weed growth is usually the sign to put plants in the ground.

Sweet peas won't die if you plant them out too early. What they will do is sulk.

This is clearly my own projection; what they are actually doing is prioritising root growth over leaf growth but every year it catches me out. I plant out what I think are strong healthy plants, and they just sit there.

Sometimes, this is because they have been planted over a mole tunnel and they hate this, but generally they are fine, they are making wonderful root systems to feed all the flowers that will come later and I am fretting unduly.

Choose a site with good soil and full sun and plant your seedlings out after the last frost, roughly 8 inches apart, against a support, trellis or netting. Once they start, they will grow rapidly and require a strong structure to climb. Hazel teepees are perfect.

Avoid bamboo canes if you can. Not only are they offensively ugly in a suburban sort of way, but their

slippery surface is impossible for tendrils to grip. Whatever you use, tie them in to get them started.

If you want strong plants and long stems, feeding the soil around your sweet peas with rich compost or some well rotted manure and making sure they are sheltered from the wind will make all the difference.

Indeed, sweet peas are heavy feeders throughout their lives and require a little extra pampering to produce abundantly.

Even if you worked hard on the soil before you planted them, they will enjoy a generous dose of natural fertilizer or fermented plant juice when the plants are growing, and a potassium rich food (such as tomato feed) when they are flowering.

Sweet peas love water, and without consistent moisture they will fail to thrive. Keeping their thirst quenched during warm weather is crucial.



COURTYARDS & CONTAINERS

Growing sweet peas in pots absolutely can be done, but probably not in the way you think.

Every year, I make a point of having a pot in the back courtyard with just Piggy Sue in it just I can sit next to it when I eat my breakfast and I can look out on it when I am doing the washing up. However, the pot is *big*.

All peas have long tap roots, and all peas are hungry plants, so I wince when I see five sweet pea plants crushed into one small pot, usually accompanied by shiny bamboo canes that the tendrils keep slipping down. You might get the odd flower from them, but they will never live a happy life, and my heart will break.

My pot is an old metal wash tub from the tip shop and it is at least a metre tall. This is no time for terracotta.

Fill it with best peat-free compost you can get your hands on and be prepared to feed. I add some inoculated biochar to mine as well. I am probably entirely biased but I think it makes all the difference.

There is, increasingly, an alternative. Owl Acre seed now sell sweet pea seed specifically for pots and containers and they are dwarf varieties. I tend to grow full size Spencers or Grandifloras in my pots (and just make sure that the pots are huge) so I cannot offer any personal advice, except that I know that this is an option for courtyard or balcony gardens where you have very real restrictions on the size and weight of pot you can use.



CUTTING & CONDITIONING

If you are growing your sweet peas for flowers and not seed collection, you are likely to want to prolong blooming. To do this, it's important that plants don't set seed, so be sure to harvest and deadhead the flowers frequently. I also recommend watering and feeding regularly; I have brought many plants back that I thought had finished for the season with a good watering can full of hydration and a dash of fermented plant juice.

The reason that you will never see sweet peas in a supermarket, and rarely in a florist, is that they are fragile and easily marked and, once cut, they have a tendency to shatter and shed. I think this makes them all the more special, and if you wrap a bunch in some brown paper and string, put the stems in a jam jar (they won't thank you for being out of water) and give them to a friend, their reaction will make every single step of this sweet pea growing

process utterly worthwhile.

Be prepared for them to be glorious but short-lived. However, for the longest vase life, pick when there are at least two unopened flowers at the tip of a stem.



SAVING SEED

I can get really stirred up about seed saving. There are many grass roots organisations who are campaigning against how something so utterly fundamental to life and yet so not created by humans can be owned. And not just owned, but commercially controlled, ruthlessly and cynically monopolised, and carefully restricted for profit and gain.

But this is Gather, and so we will not dwell on the nefarious activities of others. (However, if you would like to read more on this, I highly recommend the Seed Sovereignty website from the Gaia Foundation.) We will simply engage in daily acts of rebellion and revolution. And today, that means saving seed.

It took me years to accept that sweet pea seed could be saved at home. I do not know why I was so fixed in my belief that the varieties crossed, but I was. However, I have consulted Roger Parsons and he is very clear that the pollen is shaken out and pollinated the flower long before the flowers themselves actually open.

And so here I am. A sweet pea seed producer.

And I especially like sweet pea seed. It is big and easy and pleasingly tactile. The pods do a twirly thing and twist up when the seed is being dispersed. They rattle when they are ready for me to collect them, which is helpfull communicative.

This heat this summer did mean that seed ripening fast and I had to be quick to catch it. I harvest little and often so as not to try and pull off seeds that are still green inside their pods or, conversely, to be disappointed to find the pods twisted and empty and the seed scattered on the soil below.

Unlike some other seeds, they don't mind too much being harvested with dew or damp on them and being dried out in the studio, but be absolutely diligent in keeping them away from direct heat.

Store in a paper bag or, if using glass, make sure you add a few silica sachets. You need drier than you ever thought possible. Label immediately. Use within two years.

COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

So, what are the most common mistakes that you can make with sweet peas? I do think growing sweet peas is simple once you have grasped the principles (and if you have read this far, you must do by now) but I do often hear people bemoaning what a disaster they have had with them.

This could be why:

/ Buying/sowing old seed. My germination rate is almost 100% because I know exactly how old my seed is and it is kept in a fridge. Don't buy it from garden centres.

/ Not getting them out in the light and cold quick enough after germination; my email inbox is always

full of pictures of leggy sweet peas that got left on the kitchen windowsill (too warm, light only to one side) and questions about whether they ever recover. Most will if you pinch them back hard enough and put them somewhere cold, but it really isn't kind.

/ Using an unheated greenhouse for overwintering and letting them dry out. I have done this one; I always forget that, even if it is January and it has been raining for weeks, that won't keep the seeds trays and the sweet peas moist. Don't drench them, but the compost does need moisture in it. Only add food at this stage if they start to look yellow.

/ Leaving it too late in the spring to get going; they just don't like the heat when they are getting going and won't produce flowers as readily. Highly recommend autumn sowing...

/ Not providing support at the time of planting. They look tiny and you think you have the time to get it in later on. But it is difficult to add your trellis or support after the plants have started growing and I do find they don't really grow unless they have something to clamber up.

/ Poor soil without adding compost or fertilizer will result in weak plants and fewer flowers. All legumes are hungry, it's just in their nature.

/ Feeding with nitrogen (which gives you lots of leaves) instead of phosphorous (which gives you flowers)



THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING
HAPPY GROWING