

Sweet Peas – A Flower Garden Favorite

Botanical Name: *Lathyrus odoratus* (LATH-uh-ruhs)

Common Name: Sweet Pea

Family: Fabaceae (Leguminosae)

Type of Plant: Annual

Exposure: Full Sun

Warning – sweet peas are poisonous

Sweet peas are old-fashioned flower garden favorites. Their elegant vines have graced garden fences for over a century; and continue to charm today's gardeners with their frilly, colorful blossoms and heady scent. Blooming after spring bulbs fade, and before the rush of summer flowers, sweet peas brighten gardens on wet spring days. Best of all, sweet peas are excellent cut flowers; bringing springtime color and fragrance indoors to enjoy!



Sweet peas are easy to grow – if given proper growing conditions. Take time to learn about this wonderful flowering annual; then go forth, plant, and delight in their beautiful blossoms!

Vine-type Sweet Peas



Vine-type sweet peas grow long vines that climb by wrapping their tendrils around surrounding supports. They require sturdy support structures; such as a fence, trellis, or post/wire system. Vine-type sweet peas produce excellent blossoms for cutting; cut blossoms last about five days.

There are three general categories of vine-type sweet peas:

Heirloom, Old-fashioned, or Antique sweet peas have less showy blossoms than their modern cousins, but surpass them in fragrance.

They tolerate higher heat temperatures than other sweet peas.

Early Flowering or Winter Elegance sweet peas bloom in winter in mild zones, and early spring elsewhere. They require 10 hours of daylight to bloom. In mild winter areas, sow seeds in late summer for winter blooms. In colder zones, sow seeds in late winter for spring blooms. They make excellent winter greenhouse flowers, perfect for cutting.

Spring Flowering and Summer Flowering sweet peas require 12-15 hours of daylight to bloom. There are many varieties available, in a rainbow of colors. These sweet peas are desired for their large, showy blossoms. Plant them in mid to late spring. Fragrance levels and heat tolerance vary between types.

Bush-type Sweet Peas

Bush-type sweet pea varieties grow 6-36 inches tall. They are available in a wide range of colors; most are early or spring flowering. Their short stature makes them perfect plants for flower beds, borders, and containers, but not so perfect for cut flowers. Some types require a little support, others do not. Heat tolerance varies by cultivar. Bush-type sweet peas are a perfect early blooming annual, but may fade with summer heat.

Growing from Seed

Sweet peas are cool-season annuals. They require uniform ground temperatures of 55-65 degrees to germinate. Plants thrive at 70-80 degrees; and most varieties begin to show stress at 85 degrees.

Sweet peas are generally sown directly in the garden at the same time as edible peas. Ground temperatures should determine exactly when to direct sow. Plant seeds 1-2 inches deep; thin seedlings according to the seed package.



Sweet peas are easy to start indoors. This method is advisable if your garden soil is slow to warm in spring. Scarify (nick or scratch seed coating) and pre-soak seeds overnight to speed germination time. Sow several seeds in individual 2-3" pots and keep in a warm location (60-75 degrees). Use a good quality potting soil; keep soil moist but not drenched. Light is not required to germinate seeds. Once sprouted, give new plants as much light as possible to avoid leggy growth. Thin to one vigorous plant per pot after true leaves form. Place young potted plants in a cold-frame or other frost-protected structure until outside soil and air temperatures allow transplanting.

Pinch growing tips on young plants to encourage branching. For vine-type sweet peas, provide support as soon as tendrils form.

Plant Care

Sweet peas prefer cool, moist, well-drained soil rich in humus. Grow in full sun with good air circulation. If possible, prepare beds in the fall to avoid working with wet spring soil. Dig in generous amounts of organic material to a depth of 12-18 inches. Sweet peas prefer neutral to slightly alkaline soil (pH 7.0-7.5). In acid soils, mix in lime when preparing beds. After planting, mulch and provide adequate water throughout the growing season.

Sweet peas are members of the *Legume* family, so are able to fix (obtain) nitrogen from the air. As such, fertilizers high in nitrogen are not recommended, as they promote excessive vine/leaf growth. However, since sweet peas are prolific flowering annuals, fertilizers high in phosphorus are recommended to promote blossom growth. Phosphorus is listed as the second 'number' on fertilizer packaging (i.e. 10-20-10).

Vine-type sweet peas require sturdy structures to support their 5-10 foot long vines. Carefully attach vines with string, coated wire, or stretch ties, allowing room for future growth.

Deadhead spent flowers and remove seedpods to promote re-bloom. Caution – sweet pea pods are not edible, they are poisonous if ingested.

Plant sweet peas where heat-loving plants can take over after they fade. Sweet peas look great at the back of the flower bed, where other plants hide their untidy lower stems. Once sweet pea plants diminish, simply cut them off at ground level, leaving their nitrogen-fixing roots in place to benefit their neighbors.

Pests and Diseases

Following are the most common pests and diseases of sweet pea plants:

Protect young sweet peas from *slugs and snails*. These garden pests love sweet peas and can devour tender young plants before they are established.

Aphids also love sweet peas. Aphids spread diseases, so control is necessary. Some controls may harm foliage; read directions carefully.

Pea enation virus can ruin sweet pea plants. Symptoms are mottled foliage, yellow leaves, and reduced blossoms; plants eventually die. Aphids spread this virus; controlling these garden pests will help manage this disease. Pea enation is common in the Northwest states, west of the Cascade Mountains. In these areas, avoid late blooming varieties, since aphids typically don't appear until the weather turns hot. Also look for enation-resistant varieties.

Powdery Mildew appears as a white powdery growth on foliage. Heavily infected plants may decline; but as this disease usually occurs later in the growing season when sweet peas are already fading from hot weather, control is usually not necessary.

Pacific Northwest Sweet Pea Seed Sources

[Fragrant Garden Nursery](#)

[Territorial Seed Company](#)

[Ed Hume Seeds](#)

[Nichols Garden Nursery](#)

References

Brenzel, Kathleen Norris. *Sunset Western Garden Book*. Menlo Park: Sunset Publishing Corporation, 2001.

Prima Creative Services. *The Complete Garden Flower Book*. London: Murdock Books UK Ltd., 2001.

Miller, Luke. Sweet Peas. *Garden Gate*, Feb. 99: 8-9.

[The National Sweet Pea Society](#).

The Fragrant Garden Nursery.