Secrets to Sweet Pea Success

WHEREVER YOU LIVE, YOU CAN GROW BOUQUETS FULL OF THIS FRAGRANT AND COLORFUL CLASSIC FLOWER. Written by RENEE SHEPHERD  Photographs by STACEY CRAMP

An exquisite fragrance, ruffled blossoms, and a palette of glowing colors (not just pastels!) make sweet peas the most irresistible and memorable of garden flowers. A small bouquet of the fluted beauties perfumes a room with a scent that reminds me of orange blossoms and honey. Sweet peas’ soft, seductive fragrance never overpowers or cloys, and isn’t replicated in any artificial perfume.

I realize that sweet peas have a reputation for being difficult to grow, particularly in the Midwest and Southeast. But after talking to gardeners all over the country, I am convinced that sweet peas can be grown successfully almost anywhere, and in those few areas where they are more challenging, their beauty and fragrance are well worth the effort. Give them the proper conditions, plant them at the right time for your climate, and you will be rewarded with a delight for your senses that gardeners have treasured for centuries.

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Timing Is Key
The first step in growing sweet peas successfully is determining the best time to plant them. We generally think of them as spring flowers, but early spring may not be the optimal planting time in your climate. In middle-winter areas, where summers are very hot but the ground does not freeze in winter, sow sweet-pea seeds at the same time you plant bulbs such as daffodils: roughly from October through early November, or as soon as the weather starts to cool but rains haven’t started. This is what we do where I live in Northern California.

In these conditions, the seeds germinate and develop strong root systems but won’t show much topgrowth. In early spring, longer day length brings rapid growth and the vines shoot up. Organic grower Judy Barrett, from Austin, Texas, who publishes the magazine Homegrown, advises that if the summers are brutal and your area, you shouldn’t forget to water your sweet-pea seedlings. In very hot areas of Texas and Florida, plant sweet peas where they will get afternoon shade.

If you miss the chance to plant the seeds in fall or live in an extremely wet area, you can also plant sweet peas in late winter—January or February—where summers get very hot (as in southern California or much of Texas). In middle-winter areas that have long wet winters with cool summers, like the Pacific Northwest, sow the seeds in April or May, says Seattle gardener Susan Shockett. She cuts “armfuls of blooms” from July through September.

Where winters are moderate, such as the mid-Atlantic states, with humid summers and early, unpredictable heat, plant seeds very, very early—as soon as the ground is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil. Don’t wait until your last frost date (sweet peas can tolerate light frosts) is workable—in rich, well-drained soil.

For the very best germination rates, do not soak, but nick the seeds to allow moisture to enter the seed coat. To do this, use nail clippers to simply make a small slice in the outside seed coating. No need to gouge out a piece; just allow an opening for moisture to enter naturally. This nicking process takes extra time but guarantees great germination.

Seedling care. When seedlings reach several inches tall, thin them to stand about 5 to 6 inches apart, allowing the vines room to grow and mature. When seedlings have three or four sets of leaves, pinch off the top set to encourage branching out. Protect the seedlings from slugs and snails, using an abrasive barrier like diatomaceous earth or a nontoxic slug bait like Shogun. If seed- and seedling-eating birds typically plunder your garden, suspend netting over seedlings until they are 4 to 5 inches tall.

Water regularly. I can’t stress it enough: Adequate water is critical to success with sweet peas. Be sure to water germinating seeds, seedlings, and actively growing mature vines.
Aphids in Paris: the intensely fragrant ‘April in Paris’ (left), with aphids feeding on a blossom; lady beetles eliminate the aphid problem (center); at Maine’s Sweet Pea Gardens (bottom), Maggie and a friend admire the the colorful bouquets.

regularly when rain does not keep them consistently moist. Push your finger into the soil bed up to the first knuckle, and if it’s dry, water the sweet peas. Mulching is also important. I like to use an inch or two of well-composted horse manure, which is readily available here; composted leaves are another good choice.

Fertilize twice. Sweet peas are heavy feeders, so before you plant, amend the soil well with lots of rich compost or well-rotted manure. During the growing season, fertilize at least twice by drenching the soil with a liquid fertilizer made from a tablespoon each of fish emulsion and liquid kelp diluted in a gallon of water. (If your sweet peas are growing in containers, fertilize them every two weeks.)

Thwart insects. Sweet peas are susceptible to aphids. Wash them off with blasts of water. You can effectively control thrips, an occasional problem, with sticky pheromone traps interspersed among the vines to attract and trap them. Constant air circulation and avoiding watering late in the day and evening helps prevent mildew (until the plants succumb to it naturally at the end of their bloom period). Provide support. All the tall vining varieties climb naturally on just about any vertical support system. They grow up strings, netting, wire or wooden fencing, or almost any kind of trellis. (In very hot areas like Texas, avoid wire fencing—it can conduct heat and burn the tender vines.) You can also use tall branches left over from tree pruning driven into the soil. Since the tendrils cannot twine around thick poles like bamboo, wrap twine or netting around them so tendrils can grip. Anchor the supports well and put them in place either before you plant the seeds or when seedlings are a few inches tall.

Pick, pick, pick. The most effective and satisfying way to make the season of glorious bloom last is to pick bouquets early and often. The more you pick, the more flowers you get. Fertilizing twice the season, fertilize at least twice by drenching the soil with a liquid fertilizer made from a tablespoon each of fish emulsion and liquid kelp diluted in a gallon of water. (If your sweet peas are growing in containers, fertilize them every two weeks.)

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