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Sweet Peas

by Michelle Le Strange, Master Gardener Advisor

Even though fall is rapidly turning into winter, I'm contemplating planting sweet peas this weekend. My home landscape is fairly mature, full of perennials, shrubs and trees, a small lawn, and only one bare spot left for planting annuals. This particular spot only materialized after I removed a large tree that was just too big for its britches. Now several months have passed, the old roots have softened a bit and I am ready to transition this area into my backyard vegetable garden. It's the perfect time to plant onions, garlic and other winter vegetables, but today I got the bright idea to screen the northwest side with a trellis of sweet peas.

Why didn't I think of this earlier? Sweet peas haven't been on my radar screen for several years, but when I was cleaning my garage last week I came across a plastic tub of old sweet pea seed (both the climbers and the bush) that appeared well preserved. These old fashioned flowers continue to tickle my fancy. They wake me up from winter and welcome me to spring with their colorful blooms and aromatic fragrance. I get in a good mood just thinking about them.

So even though I prefer planting sweet peas in October, I am going to risk it and plant in December. I'll just keep my fingers crossed that we continue to get rain, we don't have a brutal cold frost followed by a long winter, and we have a slow gradual warm-up to spring and summer. Now I've surely jinxed the situation even more…

Sweet Pea Origins: Apparently it was the heavy aroma of a sweet pea flower growing in a monastery garden in Sicily that caught the attention of a Franciscan monk named Cupani. Larger than the wild sweet pea that grew on the shores of the Mediterranean, this Lathyrus odoratus had deep blue lower petals (a part of the flower structure called the "standard") topped by purple upper petals (called the "wings"). The monk shared his discovery with a horticultural friend in Britain in 1696 and soon the seeds were spread far and wide.

About a century later breeders started playing around with the navy and purple flower to improve its looks. In 30 years' time they succeeded in expanding the color range to 250+ varieties of all different shades. Next step was to render the flower more florist-worthy (bigger blossoms with more flowers on longer stems). That's apparently when the strong fragrance of the sweet pea was forfeited for looks. The modern 'Spencer' hybrids are large, luminous, wavy petals and many flowers on long, bunch-able stems. They have only a mildly sweet aroma.

Fragrant Varieties: Aromatic favorites like 'Old Spice', 'Black Knight", 'Fairy Queen' and 'Cupani's Original' are making a comeback. Renee's Garden line of seeds offers several antique varieties, like 'Queen of Hearts', 'Blue Celeste', 'Perfume Delight', and 'Queen of the Night'. For something a little more floriferous than the antique peas, try the Old Royal series. They combine profuse blossoms, heat tolerance and impressive perfume in a range of colors that's heavy on the blues. Even 'Mammoth Mix' has a pleasing scent.

Support Systems: Most sweet peas require some vertical support. Slender wires work best, providing an easy grasp for tendrils. Chicken wire is the most common solution, but green wire fencing is more attractive. Sweet peas do very well on chain link fences or you can lean the vines against lattice fencing or guide them up a sturdy tepee. Whatever support you choose, when the vines have climbed 18 inches or so, it's time to tie them up. Until that point, the tendrils seem to be doing a fine job of clinging, but the combined weight of vine and bloom will eventually pull the plants down.

Growing sweet peas: You can plant sweet peas in containers, along fence lines, mingled with star jasmine and other climbing vines on trellises, or along the side of a garage or shed. The dwarf and "knee high" varieties are perfect for beds and borders and need no support. You can plant thinly or pack the seeds snuggly in rows leaving only an inch between vines. It all depends upon space and proximity to the support fencing. Transplants are also available at nurseries. If you crowd them in a container, feed them every two to three weeks with a mild fertilizer like triple 16 (16-16-16) or a soluble fertilizer for blooms. When sown in the garden they need a little fertilizer, but not a lot, especially if the planting bed has been amended with compost and humus.

Sweet peas prefer cool, moist soil so planting them in fall and letting them grow during our foggy wet winters is perfect timing. As temperatures start to warm in spring the sweet peas are ready to start blooming and will continue to look good and thrive until temperatures reach the upper 70s. As summer approaches sweet peas stop producing flowers and the vines dry out. Pulling out spent vines is hardly a chore thanks to the lightweight foliage and shallow root system of the sweet pea.

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