

Sweet Peas — Know ‘em and Grow ‘em!

Who?

Every family who savors the unparalleled beauty of August’s sweet peas bursting forth from soft, **sweet pearly** buds to jubilant jewel colors **must** celebrate the Flower Show!

When?

Many people honor tradition by planting their sweet peas on Good Friday. Explore planting “batches” of peas weekly two weeks before and after that time in order to ensure blooms for the Flower Show. Sweet peas like cool weather and will come through those cold/warm/cool days of Montana’s early springs, with temperatures as low as 40 degrees. They may even survive a hard freeze.

Where?

Prepare a two-inch trench outdoors in rich, moist, well-drained soil. You may place well-aged composted manure in the bottom of the trench. Most varieties of sweet peas require some kind of support, such as a trellis, a wall or a fence located in a warm, sunny spot. Prepare your staking materials prior to sprouting. A 1” – 3” grid works well but sweet peas can easily adhere to other materials, such as a fence, another plant, a trellis, a cane wigwam, your ankle.... Try container sweet peas! The benefit of planting sweet peas in a container is that you can move the container to take advantage of the best weather conditions or protect them from high winds. Be sure you don’t let them dry out and fertilize monthly.

How?

To soak or not to soak? Some experts say that soaking is not necessary. The most recommended preparation is to nick the hard outer shell away from the “eye” of the seed so that moisture will penetrate and then place between two wet paper towels overnight. If you decide to soak the seeds, don’t soak them more than 48 hours at the most as the seeds will “drown.” Sweet peas do not transplant well so it is best to sow them directly into the ground.

Plant the seeds about 3 inches apart and cover with soil. Gently water the seeds in. Mulch the planting area lightly with compost to hold moisture. Some growers thin seedlings to 12” – 15” apart for more prolific blooming but some research shows that 3” – 5” is also adequate; try a little of both. Since sweet peas require cool roots after they sprout, consider planting other low-growing plants in front of the sweet peas to shade this area. (Hint: Marigolds may keep rabbits away.) You may lightly fertilize with each watering but be sure to fertilize monthly.

Prolonging Your Blooms & Growing Long-Stemmed Flowers

Flowers bloom for a couple of months with frequent pickings; the more you pick, the more they bloom. Take note, however, that after blooming for awhile, the sweet pea’s stem length shortens naturally. To regain longer stem length, side dress the plants with a little blood meal, cultivate in and irrigate thoroughly.

Tips

- Rotate your sweet pea bed from year to year as they deplete the soil of important nutrients.
- Plant sweet peas in a north/south orientation in order to maximize the plants’ sun exposure.
- Fertilize during the blossoming period.
- Remove seed pods to prolong blooming!
- Before a competition remove the tendrils on adjacent stems as they appear to prevent your show stems from becoming crooked.
- Keep the seed pods for next year? It would be an interesting science experience to see if the hybrid sweet pea seeds

retain the colors that produced them. Many hybrids revert to white. Remember the old adage... "You can't fool (with) Mother Nature!"

- Will this year's packaged sweet pea seeds work next year? Very likely, but the rate of germination *may* be diminished.

Notes