

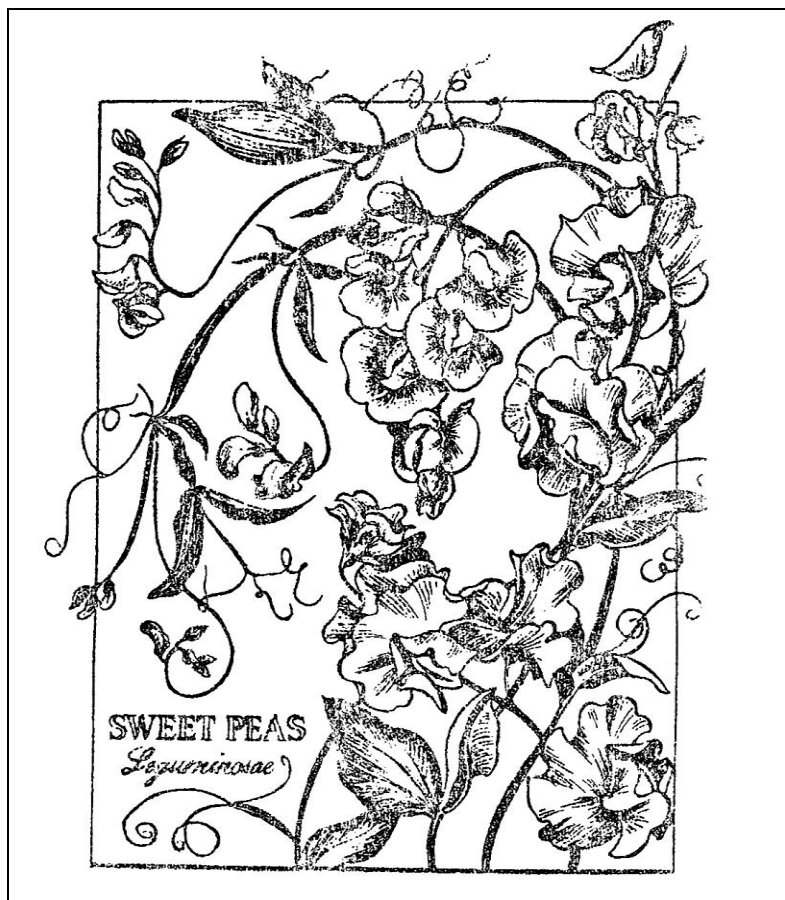


Growing Fabulous Sweet Peas (*Lathyrus Odoratus*)

➤➤➤What?

Family:	Papilionaceae	(think "butterfly")
Genus:	Lathyrus Odoratus	(simply put, "fragrant and very exciting")
Species:	Latifolius	(loosely, a "broad flower")
Botanist Credited:	Theophrastus, a Greek philosopher, student of Aristotle	
Varieties:	There are about 150 species of the <i>Lathyrus</i> genus . At one time there were about 300 hundred varieties but now, unfortunately, only about 50 are available.	

**In other words...our exquisite sweet peas are
"broad, exciting, butterfly-shaped flowers!"**



Although stories vary about its European history, the lovely sweet pea is thought to have been brought to Britain via a Sicilian monk who sent seeds to a Middlesex schoolmaster, Henry Eckford in the 19th century. Over a period of more than 30 years, Eckford crossed and selected sweet peas to produce large flowers (*grandifolia*). The Spencer family (of the Princess Di fame) later developed many of the varieties, in the Earl of Spencer's garden at Althorp, Northamptonshire, the best known being the 'Countess Spencer'. The varieties we see today which sport the Spencer name are descended from the Earl's own gardens!

The English are *crazy* about sweet peas, their "poor man's orchids." Long before our Bozeman Sweet Pea Festival was a seed in our pea-pickin' brains, a 1911 London sweet pea contest

boasted over 10,000 entries! If you spend any time on the internet researching sweet peas, you will observe that most of the in-depth information about sweet peas originates from Great Britain. As a matter of fact, the sweet pea wound itself so tightly around British culture that you will find sweet peas in a number of extremely collectible china patterns (particularly the Royal Winston), in prints and paintings, and, of course, in gardens everywhere.

There are a number of classifications of sweet peas. If you are interested in a simple website that discusses sweet pea classification, see <http://www.sweetpeagardens.com/speatypes.htm>.

➤➤➤Who?

You and all of your friends and neighbors!

In Bozeman, you can buy annual sweet pea seeds in the very early spring, available from local nurseries and stores. You may also have good success internet exploration, but be sure to adapt your growing to OUR climate, not the originating climate. Sweet peas are also available as perennials and with the growth in that area, we may have to add another category to our Festival!

➤➤➤When?

Plant sweet pea seeds outdoors in the very early spring as soon as you can work the soil. 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. Planting at this time makes it possible to enjoy blooms by mid-summer and in time for the Sweet Pea Festival in August.

➤➤➤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, and of course, your ankle....

➤➤➤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. Water 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.

➤➤➤Prolong Blooms/How to Grow Unusually 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 blossom period.
- Remove seed pods to prolong blooming!
- Before a competition remove the tendrils on adjacent stems 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 the color of their original varieties. 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.
- If you have a gardener's tip you would like to share for next year's growers, please jot it down in our guest book.

➤➤➤Resources

www.sweetpeas.org.uk/howtogrow.htm

The Sweet Pea Book by Graham Rice

www.sweetpeagardens.com/speatypes.htm