



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

A Flower that Sparks Memories (October 26, 2021)

by Jane Bodine, UCCE Master Gardener

Tell me--sentimental memories of gardens brought on by an explosive, sweet fragrance—what flower comes to mind?

I believe many of you will say Sweet Peas.

This simple-to-grow, inexpensive flower can give much joy and is easy to grow. If you want these flowers, it is best to take out the weeds in an area and then work in compost or peat moss weeks before you are ready to plant. Put up six-foot stakes and string for trellises. In late fall, soak seeds overnight before planting. Push down a pencil in the soil and plant seeds about ½ inch deep, covering the seeds and tamping down. The seeds appreciate dampness and a well-drained soil.



In our area, cold is not an issue. Sweet peas have hardiness in USDA zones from 2-11. The seeds will germinate before spring but will not climb before there is some warmth in March or April. When they do bloom, cut as many flowers as you want as cutting the blooms will stimulate more blossoming. Gather flowers in the morning when the scent will be strongest. Pollinators will also follow the trail of this sweet odor. Hot weather in May begins the plants dieback.

Sweet peas (*Lathyrus odoratus*) are annual, climbing plants. They grow to 6-8 feet tall but there are also bush varieties that can be mixed with other plants in pots. The wild sweetpea plant is purple but there are colors of cultivar from white to pink to lavender to striped! I recommend

buying seeds early because sometimes they disappear from local stores. Just note which seeds are for tall plants and which are for short ones.

Most common is planting a row of seeds in front of a south facing wall or fence in full sun or partial afternoon shade. In contrast, I plant mine in a 12' by 15' block. First, I go to a green waste facility in the country and buy a ton of compost at a very reasonable price and rototill the compost into the area.

Since I had Sweet Peas in this bed the previous year, I do not need to plant new seeds. When the old plants dried out, the seeds dehisced. That means the seeds split open and burst out, sending the seeds up in the air to replant themselves. After working in the compost, I put posts and trellises back up and then water the soil well. If it rains during the winter, I do not need to water the sweet peas. Yet the year before last, it did not rain in February and I did not water. Foxtails took over. In my experience, sweet peas with trellises will outcompete most weeds because they climb and shadow out the weeds, but if there is very little water, Foxtails will win.

From that block of mine, I normally pick 30 to 40 bouquets of sweet peas to give to friends. After harvesting this many flowers, I cannot tell there are fewer flowers! (This is a time to frequent your charitable thrift stores and buy little vases for \$1 to \$2 each.) Most of my self-replanted flowers are purple as the dominant color of hybrid flowers is purple. If you want more whites or pinks in a self-replanting garden, I suggest buying more seeds from stores that have more purebred seeds to add. If your child studies Mendelian genetics at school, they might appreciate these examples of dominant and recessive genes.

I hope you have memories of your older relatives growing sweet peas. The sense of smell triggers memory more than any other sense. My dad grew sweet peas and every Easter we three kids posed for photos in front of a wall of sweet peas. I hope you can grow these great little flowers and build up some good olfactory memories for your family.

The Tulare-Kings County Master Gardeners will be available to answer your questions:

Ace Hardware, Visalia - 1st Sat./every month, 10 am-1 pm

Luis Nursery, Visalia - 2nd Sat./every month, 10 am-2 pm

Visalia Farmer's Market - 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8-11 am, 2100 W. Caldwell Ave (behind Sears Building)

Questions? Call us:

Master Gardeners in Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30

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