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Annual Color: Sweet Peas and Pansies

by Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener Advisor

It's time to plant pansies, sweet peas, and lots of other winter and early spring color. In our mild winter climate, where the ground does not freeze, October to early November is the best time to plant cool season annuals like sweet peas and pansies. Planted now, these delicate flowers are easy to grow and are much tougher than their names imply.

They grow best in full winter sun with well drained, rich soil and good air circulation. A little breeze helps keep the plants dry and mildew free. If your soil is a sandy loam then add compost and steer manure to add fertility. If your soil is heavy clay, then work in even more composted green waste and steer manure to lighten the texture and nourish the plants. If that doesn't work and the soil stays too soggy, then consider planting on raised beds or in containers, so that water can drain.

Growing Sweet Peas: Sweet peas are easy to grow from seed and there is lots of variety on the seed racks (check out Renee's Garden Seeds, she loves sweet peas). Some nurseries carry six packs of the standard varieties for transplanting. The seeds may take 2 - 3 weeks to germinate, but they have the winter to develop strong root systems, so that when early spring arrives with the longer day lengths, the vines shoot up and start producing incredible, frilly, colorful and aromatic blossoms.

Sweet pea seeds are planted about 1 inch deep and 2-3 inches apart. You may wish to seed a little heavier and thin out plants after they have germinated, since a certain percentage will always remain dormant. Or you can soak seeds overnight (no longer) in tap water and plant only those that have swelled. Another reason to seed heavily is that snails, slugs, and cutworms like to nibble the emerging seedling. To protect young plants put up a barrier of diatomaceous earth crushed oyster shell, or use snail bait. In some yards gardeners need to discourage birds from gobbling up the seedlings and so they suspend netting over their new seed bed until the plants reach a sturdy 6 inches tall.

When seedlings are several inches tall, it's time to thin them 6 inches apart, so that the vines have room to grow. When seedlings have 3 or 4 sets of leaves, pinch off the top set so that plants branch out wider. At planting the rich compost provides the young plants with essential nutrients, but during the growing season plan on two additional light fertilizer applications, since they are relatively heavy feeders. The plants need regular water, but because we are growing them in winter months, we can often go several weeks without water.

Dwarf and "knee high" varieties do not climb so are perfect for flower beds and borders. Most sweet peas require some vertical support, so the next step is to set up a trellis system. Slender wires or string work best as they provide an easy grasp for tendrils.

Chicken wire is a common solution, but green wire fencing is more attractive. Sweet peas do very well on chain link fences or lattice panels. Whatever support you choose, don't wait too long before anchoring it in place. Consider setting up the trellis at planting.

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. The best way to make the glorious bloom last longer is to pick bouquets of flowers as soon as possible and often. Cut sweet peas when the lowest blossom on each stem is just beginning to open and put them in water right away. Over time the stems get shorter, but the flowers are as big as ever.

As summer approaches sweet peas stop producing flowers and the vines dry out. Pulling out spent vines is hardly a chore since the old foliage and root system dries down and is very lightweight.

Planting Pansies and Johnny-Jump-Ups (violas): Fall planted pansies and their smaller cousins grow twice the size and produce more flowers than those planted in spring. Both are readily available in nurseries as transplants in a wide array of color. Set plants 6-12 inches apart and mass them in a small area for the most impact. Remove each plant from the tray and lightly tease it a bit to loosen the roots rather than breaking apart the entire root ball. Place in holes and fill with soil around them. Apply a few inches of fine mulch. Water well and make sure they are well watered for a few weeks until their roots take hold.

Be on guard for snails and slugs. In winter fertilize a couple of times with a nitrate form of fertilizer, such as a calcium ammonium nitrate or ammonium nitrate, rather than ammonium sulfate.

There is one drawback to pansies and that is they need to be deadheaded regularly to keep the blooms coming. If you get tired of handpicking the spent flowers, then get your scissors or grass shears out and you'll have job done in no time. I don't complain about this task because the colorful pansies and violas cheer me up on those gray winter days.

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