

# Lavant Horticultural Society

## 'How to Grow Better Sweet Peas' Roger Parsons, 10<sup>th</sup> January 2018

Roger, based in Bracklesham Bay, holds the National Collection of Sweet Peas, currently consisting of some 1300 varieties. He grows his sweet peas naturally, not as cordons, as many professional growers do. They are grown in rows 4ft apart, using very open plastic netting, with strands about 6in apart, like deer fencing. He was very proud to have won the Daily Mail cup (one of the most challenging at the National Sweet Pea Society's National Show) with sweet peas grown naturally, whereas the winners are normally blooms grown as cordons.

### History & types of sweet peas:

Sweet peas have been grown in England since the eighteenth century. In late Victorian times hybridisation produced the "**Grandiflora**" cultivars – in spite of their name, these are now some of the smallest flowers, so Roger prefers the name "**old-fashioned**" varieties.

In 1901 a new variety 'Countess Spencer' was introduced, with longer stems and larger, frilly flowers. This was the beginning of the **Spencer** type varieties, although the original 'Countess Spencer' variety no longer exists.

For very many years, 4-5 flowers on a stem was regarded as the best that could be achieved. However, demand from the cut flower trade for more flower impact resulted in the development of "**Multiflora**" varieties, with 6-7 flowers per stem and a longer vase life.

For showing, 4 flowers per stem is still regarded as optimum.

The "old-fashioned" (Grandiflora) varieties have very good fragrance and are remarkably stable (unlike the Spencer varieties); they are very good for garden decoration, but do not have the long stems for showing.

**Modern Grandiflora** and **Semi-grandiflora** varieties have been developed that combine the best of both: the stability and fragrance of the "old-fashioned" varieties, with the Spencer longer stems and larger flowers.

### Advice on growing:

Roger recommended growing from seed, as pots of sweet pea seedlings put on sale are often just a few seeds in a pot, quickly brought on under cover to show some shoots, but without good root development.

The secret of growing good sweet peas: early sowing, good soil & good stock of the right varieties.

Chipping seed does no harm, but is not necessary for seed produced in temperate climates. In contrast, research has shown that soaking seed before planting actually reduces germination.

Roger sows into long 'Root-trainers', as these encourage good root development, and can be opened like a book to see the roots developing. Some people use toilet roll centres, which also give good root depth.

Sweet peas can also be grown in containers, and there are dwarf and semi-dwarf varieties that are good for this purpose. The container should be deep and the compost should be a mix of multi-purpose and a loam-based compost, such as John Innes.

The best times for planting are from late October to mid-February. Sweet pea is a hardy annual and grows best under hard conditions. In January – early February a little bit of warmth may be needed to ward off frost.

With the LHS Show being in August, a later time for sowing, March or even early April, would help ensure that the blooms were at their best for the Show. They would not be as good as earlier sowings would have been at their peak, but that peak would be well past by August.

As long as you have good rich soil there is no need to dig trenches with manure/compost at the bottom. However, sweet peas do require a lot of moisture and in dry spells must be adequately watered.

Lack of adequate moisture can encourage powdery mildew. There are fungicides available – the earlier they are used the best chance of success – but better to ward off attacks with good watering.

Recommended cultivars: click here to see the [varieties that Roger particularly recommended](#).

*Regretfully, these notes cannot hope to fully cover the wealth of information included in Roger's talk and any errors here are mine, not his.*

*Additional useful information can be found on Roger's own website: [www.rpsweetpeas.com](http://www.rpsweetpeas.com)*