

# Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson  
Pocahontas County Naturalist



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*Under the sweet-peas I stood  
And drew deep breaths, they smelt so good.*

These opening lines from “A Child’s Vision” by Alfred Noyes will introduce this week’s plant friend, the fragrant sweet pea. Even their Latin name, *Lathyrus odoratus*, smells good!

Sweet peas are members of the legume, bean, and pea family, which is the third largest land plant family with over 19,000 species. Like many of the flowers and vegetables we grow in our gardens, sweet peas are not native to North America but arrived in the New World as part of the great Columbian Exchange that first began in 1492.



Sweet peas were first cultivated in Sicily over 300 years ago. It wasn’t until the 1800s, however, that they became a favorite in Victorian gardens, especially the grandifloras developed by Scottish Nurseryman Henry Eckford.

Annual sweet peas grown in flower gardens should not be confused with the perennial herbaceous vine *Lathyrus latifolius*, commonly called a perennial or everlasting pea and also native to Europe. Alas, its pink and purple flowers have no scent, and it is often considered a weed.

Annual sweet peas and their cousins the garden peas excel not only in bud vases and on dinner plates but also in petri dishes. For his ground-breaking experiments, George Mendel, the Father of Modern Genetics, chose the self-pollinated pea plant for its easily observed hereditary traits such as color, height, and petal form. The sweet pea has also proven valuable in discovering and confirming several principles of genetic linkage.

Even though sweet peas are mostly self-pollinating, their fragrance still attracts bees, butterflies, and birds. To that end, some gardeners will plant a few sweet peas in amongst their pole beans to attract these welcomed pollinators.

Growing sweet peas has been compared to making piecrust – some people just seem to have the knack! My mom certainly had both talents, and so my childhood memories include apple pie in the kitchen and sweet peas on the backyard fence. Her tactics included first soaking and/or nicking the seeds before planting them into a spring snowfall. To prolong bloom time, she kept their heads in the sun and their roots in cool, moist soil. Sweet peas are vigorous climbers, so a fence or trellis is needed. For sweetest scent, pick the blooms early in the morning while the dew is still upon them.

Hundreds of sweet pea cultivars have been introduced over the years. But this year, instead of trying the latest and greatest variety, I’m going to practice what I preach. Recently I ordered two Grandiflora Mixture Sweet Pea packages from the Seed Savers Exchange in Decorah, one to plant and one to share. I can only trust these heirloom seeds will germinate, grow, and smell as sweet in today’s garden as they do down memory lane.

I’ll close with the opening lines from “Sweet Pea,” Tommy Roe’s 1964 hit song. “Oh, Sweet Pea, come on and dance with me. Come on, come on, come on and dance with me.”