

# IN THE GARDEN

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**STEVE WHYSALL**  
VANCOUVER SUN



Don't you just love sweet peas? Beautiful flowers. Lovely colours. Fabulous fragrance. They look amazing bound together in a simple posy.

So let me challenge you: How about growing some of the best sweet pea varieties to fill your garden, patio or balcony with wonderful colour and scent this summer?

Let's call it The Great Sweet Pea Challenge.

What I would like you to do is grow sweet peas in window boxes, planter boxes, on your deck, on your patio and up trellises and netting in your garden, and then report back to me on your results.

Tell me what worked and what didn't and which varieties delivered the best results and produced the most outstanding flowers.

Of course, I would love to see pictures. Lots of pictures. I think we can rustle up some prizes for the most impressive entries.

I have to confess I have not had a lot of luck with sweet peas. I can grow most things but, for some reason, I never do well with sweet peas.

This has bugged me, especially when I visit other gardens with a spectacular and super-fragrant show. It always brings out the green-eyed monster in me.

Anyway, to find out what I am doing wrong I went to the fountain of all sweet pea wisdom – the Queen of Sweet Peas, Renee Shepherd, of Felton, Calif.

She started out more than a decade ago selling only the very best French and Italian vegetable seed.

But then something unexpected happened – she fell in love with the classic elegance and heavenly fragrance of sweet peas.

She has since become a world expert on them. She sells 26 varieties (all the best antique, designer and scented varieties) through her company, Renee's Garden.

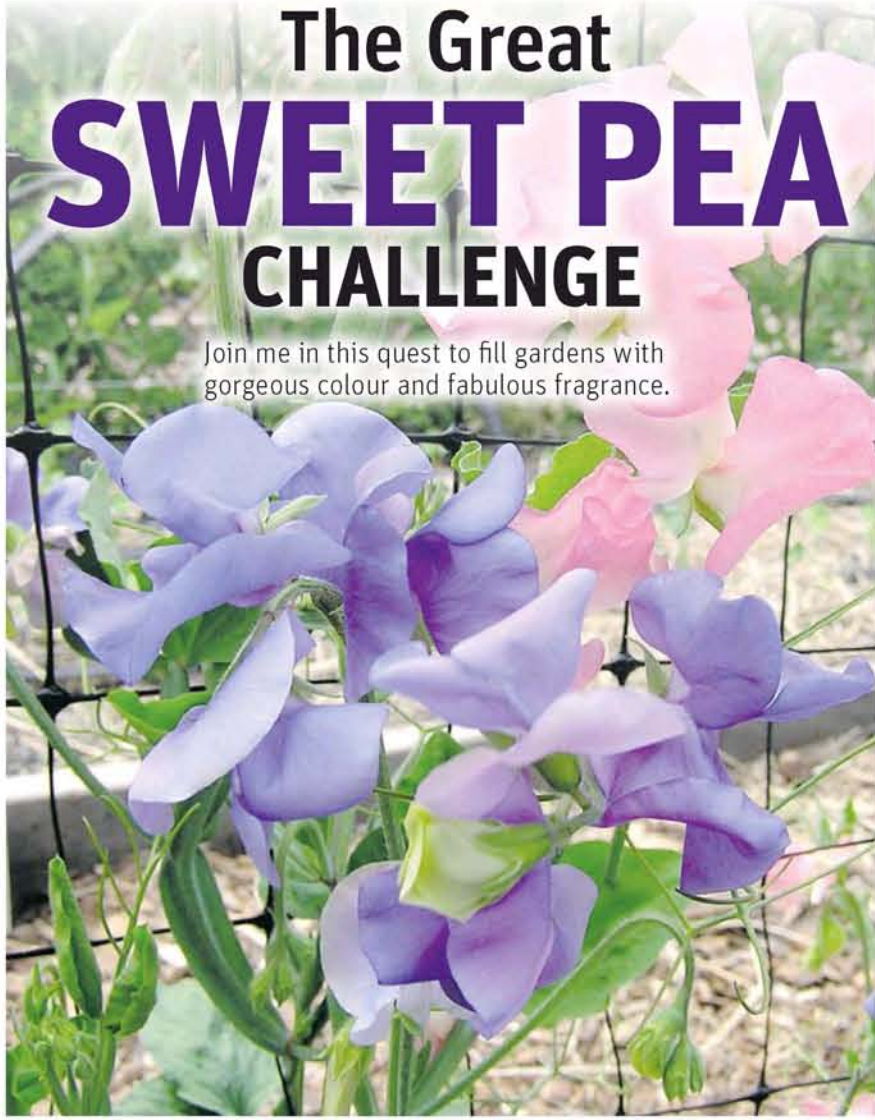
She is also in constant communication with the National Sweet Pea Society in Britain about all the latest trends and developments as well as top breeders around the world, such as Dr. Keith Hammett, of New Zealand, who has produced some of the most popular cultivars.

So I called Shepherd to get advice about which varieties to grow and how to grow them.

The first thing she wanted me to know is that sweet pea fragrance is not just any ordinary fragrance.

"Their fragrance has never been duplicated and it can't be duplicated," she said. "It is a cross between honey and orange blossom. And it's never cloying like lilies or other flowers. A single bouquet can perfume a whole room."

Next, she surprised me by pointing out that not all sweet pea varieties perform the same way.



## The Great SWEET PEA CHALLENGE

Join me in this quest to fill gardens with gorgeous colour and fabulous fragrance.

### How to grow them perfectly

How do you grow sweet peas perfectly?

Well, don't be daunted. It's not that difficult. But you will need the following: healthy, viable seed, good soil conditions, good air circulation, good pest protection and the right location.

Here are some valuable tips from sweet pea expert Renee Shepherd:

- Always buy fresh, healthy, viable seed from a reputable supplier. Seed does not stay viable forever and sometimes people have failures because the seed is old and dead.

- Start seed early. You can start them indoors in March in a good soil mix and transplant them into the garden soon after they get their first set of true leaves and are only a few inches high. Or, you can plant seed directly into the garden in April.

- Sweet pea seeds do not need a lot of heat to germinate. Unlike summer annuals, seed will sprout at 55 to 60 F. Germination can take up to three weeks.

- Pick the right varieties for the intended locations: short, cascading varieties for window boxes and hanging pots; dwarf "knee-highs" for containers; taller, climbing varieties for growing up trellises, fences or vertical supports.

- There are things you can do to speed germination. Soaking seed overnight is a popular method, but never leave seed in water longer than eight hours. A better way, says Shepherd, is to take a pair of nail clippers and nick each seed. "Do it just enough to split the skin. You don't want to tear a hole, but just make a slit in the skin to allow water to be absorbed faster."

- Sweet peas require well-drained soil, excellent air circulation and at least six hours of sunshine. Pick your location carefully. They thrive best where they get morning sun and light afternoon shade.

- Don't transplant seedlings deeper in the garden than they were in their starter pots. Sweet peas like fertile, well-drained soil. You can add well-rotted compost to the soil when planting.

- Protect your seedlings from birds, snails and slugs. This is a golden rule. "Birds can be a major problem," says Shepherd. "If you have seedlings one day and none the next, it is probably due to predatory birds. If I didn't use netting to protect my seedlings, I would have no sweet peas at all," she says. Slugs and snails can also be a problem.

- Pick flowers regularly to stop seed pods maturing. The more blossoms you pick, the more the plant will produce.

### Ready-to-go sweet peas

For those who can't be bothered with

There are some that are short and cascading and are therefore ideal for growing in window boxes and hanging pots.

Top varieties in this group are the Cupid cultivars, such as 'Colour Palette Cupid' and 'Window box Heirloom Cupid'.

Others are dwarf "knee-high" varieties that only grow 90 cm to 1.4 m (three to four feet) high and are perfect for growing in containers. Most popular in this category are 'Jack and Jill', 'Electric Blue' and 'Explorer'.

Then there are the old-fashioned "antique" and "heirloom" varieties that have a history dating back to the early 1900s such as 'Queen of Hearts', 'Jewels of Albion' and 'Perfume Delight.'

But what most people are looking for in sweet peas is the seductive scent so it is no surprise that many top sellers are the ones labelled as super-fragrant, such as 'April in Paris', 'Saltwater Taffy Swirls', 'Mary Lou Heard' and

Star sweet peas Jack & Jill (top) and 'Electric Blue'.

'Zinfandel'.

"Heirloom varieties have generally been around more than half a century and often a lot longer. Many date from the late 19th century," says Shepherd.

"These varieties all tend to have smaller, ruffled flowers with closed keel petals. All of the older, heirloom varieties are very fragrant."

There is a wide range of colours among sweet pea varieties from standard pinks and mauves to apricot and crimson as well as striking blues and burgundy purples.

'Royal Wedding' has pure white flowers while 'Lipstick' has vivid red flowers and is categorized by Shepherd as a "designer" specialty.

The biggest mistake people make is thinking of sweet peas as summer annuals, says Shepherd.

"They have nothing in common with

Renee Shepherd is one of the top suppliers for sweet peas in North America.



Cupid sweet peas: nice in containers.

annuals. They do not need a lot of heat to germinate. Which means you can start them early."

For more information and to order any of the varieties mentioned, go to Renee's Garden at [www.reneesgarden.com](http://www.reneesgarden.com).



'Jewel of Albion' sweet peas.

[swhysall@vancouver.sun.com](mailto:swhysall@vancouver.sun.com)



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seed, you can buy your sweet peas as seedlings in six packs at your local garden centre in April.

Elke Knechtel, of Red Barn Plants in Maple Ridge, another mad-keen grower of sweet peas, grows a limited number of quality plants for Lower Mainland garden centres.

"We sell them in pre-started packs so you just have to transplant them into the garden."

"I like plants that are dual purpose – not only are they pretty in the garden but they are great cut flowers and sweetly fragrant.

Knechtel says she starts seed in the greenhouse in March and often plants in the garden late March. "They seem to put out more root growth early in the season and that way they are healthier plants later when they are blooming.

"I grow mine up obelisks or arbours where I attach netting or twine so the tendrils have something to attach themselves to."