

A GIFT FOR THE NOSE! by Kelly Noel

### **A wonderful scent**

Last summer, for the first time, I grew some annual sweet peas (*Lathyrus odoratus*) in my fragrant garden. I found their scent wonderful – strong but delicate, sweet and spicy all at the same time. Even indoors, their perfume was very pleasing – bouquets I picked and brought inside made the house smell fresh.

I don't know what cultivar I had because the seeds came from a seed exchange but it must have been an old-fashioned variety – it had small but strongly scented blossoms in a variety of pastel shades. Hybridization has produced sweet pea cultivars that have frillier and showier flowers, but often with less fragrance. There are



dwarf or bush varieties, but the ones I had were vines so needed a fence or trellis to climb on. I tied the first shoots to tall bamboo poles arranged in a teepee – after that they twined and clung by tendrils on their own. By early July, they were nose-height and their sweet perfume was detectable on the breezes.

Sweet peas do best in a sunny area even though they prefer cooler weather and will lag in hot dry conditions. They are thirsty, so should be in the open, away from any rainshadows. Mine started to bloom in late June, and continued to bloom all summer long and into September. Now that is service!! To encourage this continuous bloom, I often picked a bouquet and pinched off any spent blossoms.

### **A subjective sense**

The sense of smell operates on the subconscious level so it is always “on” – a good or bad smell pulls our attention. My sweet peas were planted in a sunny spot by the driveway, near where visitors parked. Many commented on the scent right away. A friend who is a grandmother said that it evoked vivid memories of her own grandmother's garden. We can distinguish and remember thousands of smells, recognizing them even after many years.

Everyone seemed to love the sweet pea perfume. This surprised me because the sense of smell is really very subjective. I love the scent of my 'Carol Mackie' Daphne but my sister finds it objectionable. We have all been on an elevator with someone who has liberally applied a favourite scented product that we find unpleasant. In situations like this, we can be glad that the sense of smell fatigues easily – even bad smells seem less potent after a period of contact. But there were no turned up noses at my sweet peas.

### **From seed to seed**

The fruits look exactly like little peapods. The immature seeds are bright green "peas" (both inedible and poisonous by the way). When the pods started to shrivel and split, I collected lots of seeds, hard brown capsules by that time. I got some from a friend's plants too. Hers were also fragrant but had hotter-coloured blossoms – reds and oranges - which should brighten up my display next summer.

I spread the seeds out on paper towelling to dry, then put them in small brown envelopes and stored them in a cool dry place. I did put a couple of envelopes in the refrigerator because I read that vernalization (exposure to a period of cold) could improve blossom production. We shall see!

I have a bench with grow lights which I roll out every year in late January. By then I am ready for some green and it delights me to watch seedlings push their way out of the soil and unfurl leaves. Last year in mid-February, I soaked the sweet pea seeds overnight in room temperature water. Several of them already had the tiny radicle poking out when I planted them, about 2cm deep and 3 seeds to a pot. I used 15cm pots and a sterile soilless potting mix with nutrients to give the seedlings lots of root room and some food to grow on for their 3 months in the pot. The first shoots appeared in 8 days. By mid-May, when I hardened them off, they were about 20cm tall and clinging to a small support stake I had put in each pot. Apparently a light frost will not nip them too badly but I didn't risk that, waiting until the first of June to plant them out. I could have sown the seed directly into the garden in April but I would not have seen any blooms until August – too long to wait!!

### **Inspiration!**

Why am I thinking of sweet peas now, with the holiday season fast approaching? A recent dinner guest gave me some candles scented with a fragrance that has reminded me of the sweet peas. The house will soon be full of the aromas of ever-greens but right now, it is sweet peas I can smell and this has inspired a gift idea. I will make up some "sweet pea" kits to give to people on my gift list who might enjoy growing their own. They don't need all the paraphernalia that I have to grow some seeds – just room enough for a few pots in a sunny spot – on a windowsill or the floor. Each kit will include a seed packet, a bag of soilless mix, plastic pots and small support stakes – with some instructions and a photo tucked in.

The benefit for me if they are successful with this green thumb project is that, when I visit their gardens next summer, I will be greeted by the lovely scent of sweet peas!!