

Lathyrus odoratus

SWEET PEA is an annual climber. Native to Sicily and southern Italy it has small fragrant, pink, white or purple flowers.

It is also known as *Atr* (Arabic), *Ervilhas-de-cheiro* (Portuguese), Garden sweet pea, *Gartenwicke* (German), *Guisante de olor* (Spanish), *Hrachor voňavý* (Slovak), *Hrachor vonný* (Czech), *Lathyrus* (Dutch), *Luktärt* (Swedish), Painted lady, *Pizo bonodora* (Esperanto), *Pois de senteur* (French), and *Tuoksuharne* (Finnish); and in flower language it is said to be a symbol of ‘appoint a meeting’, delicacy, delicate pleasures, departure, lasting pleasures, and ‘remember me’.

Warning – the seeds are poisonous for humans and animals and can cause physical deformity. They are the cause of lathyrism eg. paralysis of the larynx, excitability, shallow breathing, convulsions and ultimately death.

Odoratus is derived from Latin *odor* (scent, smell, odour) meaning ‘scented or fragrant’.

The English poet John Keats (1795-1821) is credited with naming the plant Sweet pea.

The sweet pea is believed to have been discovered in the wild in Sicily by a Franciscan monk who was a much respected botanist, Father Francesco Cupani (1657-1719). Some authorities say the flower arrived in Britain in 1699 when Father Cupani sent some seed (others claim the following year) to a Dr. Uvedale who was the English headmaster of Enfield Grammar School outside London and happened to be the proud owner of one of the few heated greenhouses in the Country at that time. Yet others contend that it appeared in England a few years later still.

Since that time the flowers have adapted to the cooler climate in Britain more readily and are not only stronger but in their varieties produce a greater number of colours. Much of the credit for this is attributed to a gentleman called Silas Cole, who was gardener at Althorp Park, Northamptonshire owned by the Spencer family. He recorded how he devoted his attention to the sweet pea from 1898 and developed new varieties including the ‘Countess Spencer’. By the end of the 19th Century the sweet pea had gained such popularity in the Islands that in 1901 the English National Sweet Pea Society was established, and the flower became strongly associated with Edwardian England.

Although it was said to have nearly disappeared from its natural habitat in Sicily in about the 1960s a stock of the uncultivated plants was found in Quito, Ecuador (probably introduced there by the Spaniards during their 16th Century conquests in South America). From these it is understood that sweet pea plants have been reintroduced to the Island.

It was once believed by some that the plant would produce the most fragrant flowers if it had been sown on St. Patrick’s Day (17th March), especially in America in Illinois where they had to go into the ground before sunrise. As sweet pea tendrils are said to recoil from touching ash (*Fraxinus*) support canes are best not made from that tree.

Sweet peas have not been overlooked in literature. For instance John Keats (1795-1821) wrote

Here are sweet peas, on tiptoe for a flight;
With wings of gently flush o’er delicate white,
And taper fingers catching at all things,
To bind them all about with tiny rings.

In heraldry the sweet pea features not least as a play on words in the device of the British Association of Urological Surgeons.
It is the birthday flower for 1st February, and is associated with April.