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Chapter Seven

PRODUCING THE PERFECT SWEET PEA

Here we enter the realm of the flower show exhibitor, for whom producing the perfect Sweet Pea is not enough - they want a whole vase of them to impress the judge. These are always the Spencer type of Sweet Pea unless in exceptional circumstances the schedule specifies that a class is for some other type of Sweet Pea.

CHOOSING VARIETIES

There is no doubt that some varieties lend themselves more readily than others to producing that elusive “perfect” bloom. This may be because they keep uniform colour, hold their raceme length, have larger petals, produce fewer malformed blooms, produce more blooms in total, or any of the other considerations mentioned later in this chapter. You therefore need the right varieties. One way for the novice to identify these is to choose from the leading varieties in the “audit of varieties” exhibited at national Sweet Pea shows. This is published each year by the National Sweet Pea Society (NSPS). In reality, there are more varieties which are very good for exhibition than appear at the top of the audit list. For example, two new crimson varieties were introduced just over 10 years ago, ‘Millennium’ and ‘Ruby Anniversary’, which are virtually identical. Both are excellent but ‘Millennium’ was introduced a couple of years earlier and included by a leading exhibitor in his Daily Mail Cup winning exhibit. From then, the word got out that this is a good one, and everyone grew it so it quickly reached the top ten in the audit list. ‘Ruby Anniversary’ is just as good but the safe option is to go for the one with the track record. With experience, the grower will find which varieties suit his soil and microclimate and which don’t. In the meantime, using the varieties with a track record avoids the risk of choosing a completely unsuitable variety.

Quality of stock for exhibition

Care should be taken by the novice exhibitor in choosing where to buy seeds. Having decided upon a variety, the quality of stock varies from one seedsman to another. This is particularly the case with older, popular varieties that are available from many sources. As an example, ‘White Supreme’ was introduced in 1990. During the 1990s, it was an exceptionally popular variety being good for exhibiting and for garden decoration. Twenty years later, it is still quite widely available but the quality varies enormously. Some stocks have been poorly maintained so that the petals are no longer frilly. Others are satisfactory but the exhibitor may find more recent varieties perform better. At least one stock has been reselected to restore the original qualities so that it is as good for exhibition as it ever was.

For the novice exhibitor, there is merit in buying seeds from a variety of sources in the first year so that you can tell for yourself which suppliers have the better stocks and more reliable germination. Taking advice from other exhibitors may help you, so the serious exhibitor should become a member of NSPS. This is a good way to meet other exhibitors and learn from their experience. Because there is so little prize money at shows, most exhibitors are relaxed and friendly: only too pleased to encourage a newcomer by sharing their experiences and offering guidance. Even if you are only planning to exhibit at your local flower show, there is much to be gained from membership of NSPS.

Most novice exhibitors grow more varieties than they should; after all, how can you resist all those lovely colours? However, the more plants that you have of a variety, the more chance of achieving a good quality vase on the show bench. As a guide, the number of plants to grow should be 2.5 times the number of racemes required in a vase. So if the show schedule requires 9 stems (racemes) in a vase, then you should start with around 22 or 23 plants of the variety. This will mean sowing 30 seeds or more of the variety to ensure enough good plants for planting out.

GROWING FOR EXHIBITION

Much has already been said in earlier chapters that applies when growing Sweet Peas for exhibition as for any other purpose. Producing young plants is the same. A flower show uses the same guidance on timing that applies for any other event. Most exhibitors will have opted for the cordon system of culture, unless on very strong ground when double cordons or even natural culture might be appropriate. If aiming for a late show, it may be necessary to remove the young racemes as they start to appear so that the plant's energy goes into vegetative growth and is not wasted on unwanted blooms.

Two weeks before the show

The time when the exhibitor really starts to pay attention is two weeks before a show when the prevailing weather determines whether bud-drop can be expected or not. From then on, an eye should be kept on the weather to anticipate what it is going to do, so that side shoots can be allowed to grow if poor or removed if hot weather expected. Similarly with watering: better to have given plenty prior to the fortnight before a big show so that no water is needed during these two weeks. If watering is unavoidable, for example on light soils, this should be applied uniformly at the same rate as previously. This is because applying water can give a surge in growth, including that of the raceme as it unfolds during the two weeks. The effect of this is to increase the gap between flowers, making for uneven placement. Optimum placement is considered by one very successful exhibitor, Alec Cave, to be achieved when the length of the internode is 95cm (3 ¾ inches), depending on variety. Internodes that are longer than this show plants are growing too vigorously, through too much water or nitrogen, and the raceme will be gapped. Internodes that are shorter will produce racemes where the flowers are too bunched together.

One week before the show

Around one week before the show is the time to look at the developing racemes and see how many buds are present. These will be clustered in the growing point or else the raceme may be starting to extend from the axil. This gives an indication of how many plants are producing racemes with potentially the right number of flowers. It would be wonderful to produce a vase of Sweet Peas with five flowers on each raceme, and with all flowers fully open and in good condition. In reality, this is so difficult to achieve that people rarely try. Most modern varieties have been bred to consistently produce four flowers since this is what the exhibitor seeks to achieve. Some excellent varieties for exhibition will readily produce more flowers when well grown, for example 'Jilly'. With these varieties you can remove the youngest bud from any racemes that are developing five flowers. There is a small risk that later on one of the remaining buds is lost so you end up with just three flowers. However, removal at this stage enables the raceme to develop as if the fifth bud had never been there. Removing a flower later, when preparing for the show, is not so easily hidden from the judge.

During this final week, several other tasks should be considered. Prepare a checklist of all the things that you may need to take to the show for staging your exhibit. This might include obvious items such as buckets, vases, staging material, sharp knife, foliage, dry cloth, show schedule and not forgetting your blooms. It might also include less obvious items: a pen for writing variety name cards, old newspaper for mopping water and wrapping up rubbish, a long knife for slicing florist's foam, a fine brush for removing specks from petals, a very small can for topping up the water in vases, a folding table in case there are insufficient at the show, and a measuring tape for decorative classes required to be within a stated size. Other items that might be needed if the show is not local include refreshments, a camera for recording your success, money, mobile phone, something to sit on, and suitable clothing for all weathers. If overnight staging, a sleeping bag, pillow and a torch may be minimum requirements.

Preparing blooms for the show

The weather will be monitored closely during this period and protective covers put in place over the plants, if available, when poor weather is forecast. Growth will be considered daily and adjustments made to get the timing of blooms right for the big day, as discussed in chapter 3. Early in the season, when cordon racemes are particularly long, some growers like to place a loop of wire around those developing racemes that will be considered for cutting. The wire holds the raceme loosely in position and prevents the raceme bending over in wind, under its own weight. Having looped the wire around the raceme, the other end is secured firmly to the cane. This is easily achieved by using a wooden, spring type, clothes peg with a fine hole drilled for the wire to pass through, or using a zinc-plated tool clip, spring paper clip, or similar. In cold, wet conditions, some varieties may have a gap between upper and lower flowers that will lead to them being down-pointed. The grower should be ever-vigilant for this condition developing and give a foliar feed of sulphate of potash in order to reduce the gap. A foliar feed is preferred to a liquid feed so that the roots are not receiving yet more water.

If not growing under a protective cover, timing of cutting for the show may be varied according to prevailing weather conditions but, as a guide, it is best to cut 24

hours before the blooms are due to be judged. At this time, blooms should be cut with the top bloom not quite fully open. They should then be treated as previously described for cut flowers. It is worth allowing plenty of time for cutting blooms for the show if you can. This is not always easy, for example if cutting when rain threatens! Assuming time permits, examine each bloom carefully and only cut those that you will be content to put in a vase on the show bench. If a raceme has faults at the time of cutting, they will not be any better at staging time. Having said that, you should always aim to take some spare racemes to allow for damage in transit.

Transporting blooms to the show

Most exhibitors like to transport their blooms to the show in water but care must be taken to ensure that blooms do not get spoiled by water splashes and are not so crowded that petals get damaged. The alternative is to carry dry in flower boxes. The peduncles need to be carefully dried when placing blooms in boxes and at least two hours must be allowed on arrival at the show for the blooms to steep in buckets of water before you can begin to stage them. Dry carrying is not recommended for beginners. All manner of devices are used by people to transport blooms to the show but the most popular principle is to use one or more containers that are wider than their height for stability. Inside these should be some wire mesh or wet floral foam to hold the bottoms of the racemes. The tops of the racemes are held upright using wire mesh stretched across the top of the container or a lid with holes drilled in it.

At the show

It should go without saying that the exhibitor will have made themselves familiar with the show's rules and the requirements for staging the class or classes entered. This applies with all flower showing. Allow plenty of time for staging and, on arrival at the show, choose somewhere with good light to set up your blooms in their vases. Vases should be prepared with staging material; nowadays floral foam has become almost universally used but the traditional medium was stems of the Soft Rush, *Juncus effusus*. Floral foam must be soaked in water prior to staging and should be sculpted to fit tightly into the vase without forcing. An inch depth of foam at the top of the vase is sufficient as the racemes are only just placed into it deeply enough to be held firmly while allowing maximum height. Water must be placed in the vase prior to inserting the foam with the water level reaching the bottom of the foam. Rather than have the foam dead level with the rim of the vase, a shallow lip of say 3mm ($\frac{1}{8}$ inch) should be allowed so that water can be added to the vase after staging.

During staging, first lay out your blooms on a clean cloth, taking care to dry the end of each raceme before placing it on the cloth. This avoids the risk of petals picking up moisture from the cloth and damaging them. The blooms are selected and arranged as they will appear in the vase, allowing for an even distance between top and bottom flower of each raceme and allowing for handedness. By this, we mean that each raceme is left-handed or right-handed depending which way the lowest flower is facing. In order to arrange an even vase with flowers nicely spaced, it is easier to put all the left-handed blooms on the left side and all the right-handed blooms on the right side. Uniformity is achieved through having the same number of flowers on each raceme. You may be very proud to have a perfect "five" of a variety but, if it is the only one, better to leave it out and use all fours. If short of blooms, such a "five"

should be placed in the middle at the back so that it does not spoil the uniformity of the arrangement. Avoid “threes” unless short of blooms.

How many stems in a vase?

In staging your vase, take great care that the number of racemes (stems) required, according to the show schedule, are provided. This may be an exact number (e.g. 7 stems) or it may say up to a number (e.g up to 7 stems). If the schedule states up to a number, it is permissible to have less but remember that the judge will take account of having less racemes. Having six good racemes and one weak one may be better than having six racemes and one missing. If the schedule requires seven or less racemes, these are better displayed as a single row in the vase, presenting a straight line of blooms facing the front. If nine racemes are required, these are generally staged in two rows, with five in the back row and four in the front. This usually gives a more pleasing appearance than a single row of nine racemes. With experience, variations can be tried, such as six and three, and each exhibitor develops their own style of staging. For a vase of 12 racemes, rows of seven and five are recommended for the beginner, with a third row of three added to the front if staging a vase of 15 racemes. For a multi-vase class (e.g. three vases of nine stems in each vase), the same style should be used for each vase so that all vases are uniform on height, width and placement.

A good tip for the novice exhibitor is to watch an experienced grower during staging, taking care not to interrupt them. It is very good experience to enter the NSPS national shows. This may seem like jumping in at the deep end but there are divisions ensuring you compete against those growing a similar number of plants to yourself. Time allowed for staging at these shows is 12 to 14 hours so there is plenty of opportunity to watch the leading exhibitors and, when they are taking a break, talk to them. Most will be only too pleased to help get you started. Tips such as how to straighten a peduncle, trim petals or remove blemishes are better shown than explained here. There is a convention that a pair of leaflets is placed in the vase behind all racemes and another one at the front. These finish the vase nicely and are the “foliage” mentioned earlier in my checklist. Leaves should be cut just before departing for the show and are best transported dry in a plastic carrier bag to which a splash of water has been added and then the handles tied together at the top.

In setting up a multi-vase class on the show bench, consideration should be given to how the colours are arranged. Some colours complement each other well while others clash. Some colours are warm and come towards the viewer while others are cold. Let us use a three vase class as an example. The show manager will normally have these staged on tiered benching, one in front of the other. Suppose a red or warm pink has been staged as one vase, a white, cream or picotee as the second vase, and a lavender or other cold colour as the third, The classic way to present these is for the warm vase to be furthest away at the back, the neutral vase in the middle and the cold colour at the front. Other factors may vary this. For example, if you have two good vases and the cold colour is weak for some reason, it may be better for immediate impact to hide the weakest vase at the back.

WHAT IS A PERFECT SWEET PEA?

A judge should be considering the blooms as presented at the time of judging and not take account of how good they were or how good they may become in a few hours. Each raceme needs to be at its best at the time of judging and the exhibitor should be aware, when staging their blooms, of what the judge ought to be looking for. I say ought to because some judges are more experienced than others, particularly at local shows where a generalist, rather than a specialist, judge may have been appointed. A judge should be looking for perfection in every raceme, and when assessing its true merits, the quality i.e. freshness, cleanliness, condition, form, placement, uniformity with balance and trueness of colour, should be regarded as important factors. All imperfections, defects, blemishes and other faults detract from the merits of the exhibit. The quality of the flowers exhibited should at all times be the main consideration and should override mere size.

For each class, the judge should first scrutinise the wording of the schedule to ascertain the constraints for the class and disqualify an exhibit which does not comply with these. The number of racemes must be in accordance with the schedule. They should be arranged to show each raceme clearly and single variety vases should be accurately labelled.

NSPS has established a points system to assist judges in balancing strengths and weaknesses of exhibits and this will normally be used where a class requires an exhibit of more than one vase.

The points for each vase are made up as follows:

Freshness, Cleanliness and Condition	7 points
Form, Placement and Uniformity	6 points
Trueness of Colour	4 points
Size of Bloom in Balance with Stem	<u>3 points</u>
TOTAL	<u>20 points</u>

In multi vase classes, the disposition of the varieties should be harmonious and balanced with a broad spectrum of colours. Varieties should be “distinct” i.e. recognisably different colours. Judges should give due consideration to colour range within the exhibit. Two or more vases included in an exhibit which are closely similar may be downpointed, although this is currently being reviewed by NSPS. If there is a tie when all the points for each exhibit are totalled, an additional one point is available for presentation, i.e. the quality of staging. Sweet Pea foliage used in vase classes should not otherwise be judged as part of the exhibit.

Turning to the factors that make up the points for each vase, each factor is discussed below in terms of merits.

Freshness, Cleanliness and Condition

Each flower should be fresh, in prime condition, fully open with standard and wings crisp, keel closed, the whole, including calyx, being of good texture. Blooms should be free from blemish of any kind and free from aphids and caterpillars or signs of their presence. There should be no tearing, bruising or fraying of the petals or evidence of the use of scissors to remove damaged tissue or whole flowers. The presence of pollen beetles should be disregarded.

Form, Placement and Uniformity

Form should be true to cultivar and uniform throughout the vase, including frilliness of individual flowers. The ideal bloom formation is an erect frilly standard, not reflexed, stunted or hooded, a pair of equal sized wings forward enclosing the keel. Blooms with a duplex standard are not acceptable unless they are of equal height and width and lie evenly one over the other, and are not malformed. There should be no other malformation (see chapter 3). Each raceme should have four, well poised, forward facing flowers alternatively spaced on the raceme at regular intervals, without gapping or bunching. The number of flowers per raceme should ideally be uniform throughout the vase when possible, but allowance should be made without penalty for the inclusion of one or more racemes carrying additional flowers, providing the presentation remains in balance. Any racemes carrying less than four flowers will be downpointed.

Trueness of Colour

The colour of established varieties should be true to the current Classification List, published annually by NSPS. Novelties, seedlings and non-listed cultivars can be exhibited in their appropriate colour classes. Except for vases of mixed colours the colour should be uniform throughout. There should be no variation due to age, weather, virus, scorch, and loss of colour tone due to refrigeration, excessive use of covers or water additives after cutting.

Size of Bloom in Balance with Stem

Size of bloom should be representative of the variety, without coarseness, and uniform throughout the vase. Racemes should be straight with length and texture proportionate to size of bloom without weakness in the neck, coarseness or flattening.

GRANDIFLORA VARIETIES

When judging classes that require Old Fashioned and Grandiflora varieties, factors to be considered by the judge are identical to those for Spencer varieties with the exception of form. For Old Fashioned varieties, form should be true to variety and uniform throughout the vase. The ideal formation is an erect plain standard but hooded standards and notched edges should not be significantly downpointed where these are characteristic of the variety. A pair of equal sized wings should enclose the keel. There should be no malformation. Flowers should be well poised, forward facing, alternatively spaced on the stem at regular intervals without gapping or bunching. Four flowers per raceme are preferred but three should not be downpointed. For varieties normally producing two or three flowers, three flowers per raceme are preferred but two should not be downpointed.

Best in Show and Special Awards

Judges should consider single variety vases as more meritorious when in competition with mixed variety vases for special awards such as best in show, all other things being equal. Individual vases in multi-vase classes have no particular merit so that all vases seen should be considered for awards, including those in single vase classes. Final judging of award vases may be pointed where necessary.

Disqualification

What can be more frustrating on entering a show after judging, to find that your exhibit has been disqualified? Judges may disqualify:

- Exhibits which do not comply with the schedule.
- Exhibits where the colour or plain-ness of one or more racemes is not true to variety.
- Exhibits where wire or other support to the blooms is used.
- Exhibits where any staging material appears above the rim of the vase / bowl, except when specified.
- Exhibits in which racemes with haulm attached are used, unless specifically permitted.
- Exhibits containing other foliage, flowers, flower buds, grasses or seed heads except where the schedule permits the use of these in the class.
- Exhibits where the racemes are not in water or water-containing material.
- Exhibits where the wrong size and / or shape of vase / container has been used.

If a vase in a multi vase exhibit is not according to the schedule, then the whole exhibit should be disqualified and cannot be considered for an award. However, awards are permitted to individual vases other than the disqualified vase.

DECORATIVE CLASSES

Serried ranks of vases of Sweet Peas make a splendid sight but equally impressive to visitors attending a flower show are the decorative classes. These may vary, and the NSPS national shows have a very wide range of decorative exhibits, but the one most commonly encountered is the mixed bowl. These are particularly popular with some exhibitors because they allow a greater degree of artistic creativity without entering the realm of floral art. They are also an opportunity to use blooms that are perhaps not quite good enough for the vases, or a variety without sufficient racemes for a vase.

If you decide to enter a decorative class, it is particularly important to read the schedule to ensure you comply with the rules and individual class requirements. For a mixed bowl, the size of bowl that can be used may be specified. It will also state if foliage can be used, and whether or not this is restricted to Sweet Pea foliage or all types of plant. Sometimes classes will allow other flowers, and / or grass flowers and seed heads, to be used. There may be a restriction on the number of racemes that can be used in the exhibit. There may also be a restriction on the space allowed for the exhibit – do not exceed this, even by a tiny amount. Some classes require an exhibit that is viewed from the front while others require one that is viewed from all around.

Staging a Mixed Bowl

In order to stage a mixed bowl, first thoroughly soak half a block of floral foam to absorb water. Most foams are designed to absorb water quickly if placed in water with the writing facing upwards. The foam is then placed in the bowl and, if necessary, secured with florist's tape. Ensure the foam complies with any height

restriction. The bowl should then have water added if the show lasts more than one day. You start by inserting stems of foliage into the foam so that they hide the top of the bowl and hide the foam. Assuming other foliage is allowed, it is better to use light foliage with small leaves or leaflets such as *Pittosporum tenuifolium*, *Lonicera nitida* or ferns, for example. *Thalictrum sp.* make a cheap and easy substitute for fern leaves. Similarly, if other flowers are permitted, use *Gypsophila paniculata*, *Alchemilla mollis* or other small flowers. All these ensure that the foliage and other flowers do not detract from the Sweet Peas, which should dominate. The height and spread of these accessories should be sufficient to hide the bare stems of the Sweet Pea blooms, once these are in position, without engulfing them. Try using the coloured leaf forms of Gardener's Garters, *Phalaris arundinacea*, for its decorative effect. However, it is a grass so cannot be used if the class states that grasses are not allowed. It can be used if the only guidance is to permit any foliage.

Once the accessories are in position, the Sweet Pea blooms can be inserted. A mixed bowl is usually required to be viewed from all round. In this case, place your best bloom as a standard in the middle and facing the front. Four blooms are then inserted into the sides of the foam facing upwards, so that they form a cross if looking down on the bowl. These should be almost horizontal but not touching the benching. My next bloom is placed behind the standard bloom and facing backwards. Other blooms are then inserted facing downwards to fill in between the standard and the cross. These are spaced according to the number of blooms allowed and to ensure an even distribution of colours. Finally, the whole is considered from all angles and any adjustments made to avoid gaps or crowding.

Use of Colour

It is important to appreciate that some colours complement one another while others clash. This applies to foliage and other flowers, not just the Sweet Peas. To some extent this is a matter of personal taste but there are colour combinations which most people agree should be avoided. Some people prefer strong contrasting colours while others prefer complementary pastel shades. Some colours are considered warm (e.g. many reds) and others cold (e.g. blues). Some such as blue and yellow hit the eye faster because of their wavelength. Yellow foliage can therefore overwhelm the blooms and should be used with care.

Broad mixtures of colours can be very attractive but my preference is for a blend of three or occasionally more colours. Care should be taken to ensure that white ground and cream ground peas are not mixed. Cream will blend with salmon pink on cream ground, for example, but not salmon pink on white ground. Strong contrasts such as cream and mauve, white and maroon, pale pink and crimson, work well. Very close colours are best avoided, for example scarlet and orange-red, pale blue and lavender. Some seedsmen offer their own blend of themed colours.

JUDGING DECORATIVE CLASSES

The judge should take care to ensure that exhibits comply with the requirements concerning number of racemes, permitted size of the exhibit, height of staging material, type of container, and use of any foliage, flowers, flower buds,

grasses or seed heads. The exhibit should be judged either front facing or for all round effect as specified in the schedule.

Under NSPS rules, decorative classes should be judged for both quality of blooms and decorative effect with a maximum 20 points awarded for each element.

Points for decorative classes are:

Quality of blooms	20 points
Balance, Scale and Proportion	6 points
Foliage / other flowers / grasses	4 points
Rhythm	5 points
Contrast and Harmony	<u>5 points</u>
	<u>40 points</u>

Quality of blooms

The same criteria and pointing should be used as for judging vases, described earlier. It will often be necessary to reduce, sometimes quite drastically, the length of racemes. It is not a requirement of decorative exhibits for all racemes to be the same length.

Balance Scale and Proportion

The arrangement should be of a three dimensional design to show off the flowers to their best advantage. It should fill the available space but must not exceed dimensions where specified in the schedule. The foam or other staging material should not be visible at all. Blooms should not be resting on the show bench. Baskets must be capable of being lifted by the handle without disturbing any part of the display

Foliage and / or other flowers and / or grasses

These should be in good condition, clean, fresh and free from blemishes, pests and diseases. They should not detract from or dominate the sweet pea flowers. There is no obligation on the exhibitor to have grown these, only the sweet peas must be grown by the exhibitor.

Rhythm

The exhibit should be of good design with a harmonious shape which looks attractive from all required judging angles. The eye should pass easily over the exhibit without anything 'jarring' on the viewer. Flowers should be placed pleasingly throughout the exhibit without obvious gaps or crowding. Proximity of the blooms to one another should be neither too close nor too sparse.

Contrast and Harmony

The blend or contrast of colours used should be attractive and harmonious. Contrasting colours can be as effective as more subtle blends when used with good complementary foliage to enhance the display. An even balance of colour throughout the display should be seen whatever colour scheme has been chosen.