

ROGER PARSONS

The sweet pea breeder on establishing a sweet pea seed bank, what constitutes a perfect flower and how a weekend visit to Woolworths sparked a life-long obsession

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It was a Saturday morning outing with his mother in the 1960s to the Birkenhead branch of Woolworths, to buy six packets of sweet pea seeds, that would mark the start of Roger Parsons' lifelong association with the flower. He didn't know it at the time, but those seeds would lead him on the path to becoming one of the world's foremost sweet pea experts, author of an authoritative monograph, a plant breeder and the passionate guardian of a sweet pea seed bank.

"From the age of ten or so, I was sort of in charge of the garden whether I wanted to be or not," he says. "Even at quite a young age, I was fascinated that I could grow plants from seed. Growing up in an urban environment, the whole natural process was fascinating to me."

The sweet peas that he sowed at the age of 12 flowered briefly and died. "I didn't know about deadheading so they went to seed," he says. "I remembered thinking they were nice and beautifully coloured while they lasted, but their season was short." He was surprised the following year when self-sown seedlings appeared and flowered. "But I was so disappointed to see that half of them were rose pink and some of the colours didn't appear at all. Looking back, I realise that it was my first lesson on genetic drift in plant populations."

Roger knew he didn't want to work in an office, and his career began at the age of 17 as an assistant gardener in the local parks department and progressed to managing parks and gardens. During the 1980s, he came across a group of gardeners at his local horticultural society who were growing beautiful sweet peas. "It used to astound me the quality of the blooms they could produce." Inspired by them, Roger started to focus his growing skills on sweet peas. "Some plants are easy to grow; sweet peas are very easy to grow, but to grow them really well takes a bit more effort, dedication and skill." He began to realise that during this period he seemed to be growing more and more sweet peas and less of anything else.

For Roger, the attraction of sweet peas was firstly in their scent. "Fragrance is so important: if a flower doesn't have fragrance, I feel that I am being short changed," he says. Add to the fragrance "the fabulous range of colours, the elegance of the blooms, the daintiness and poise on the stem" and you have, for Roger, the perfect flower.

The parent of all sweet peas is *Lathyrus odoratus* and in 1993 Roger established a National Collection of species *Lathyrus* at Hotham Park in Bognor Regis, which, at the time, he managed. During this period, he became concerned that many sweet pea cultivars were no longer

being sold, particularly as specialist growers retired and nurseries closed. "I gradually became aware that good varieties were being lost. I realised that the gene pool was narrowing so in 1998 I started a seed bank by collecting every sweet pea I could from all over the world."

His collection, assisted by Roger's scouring of old seed catalogues, now numbers 1,300 cultivars which, since taking early retirement in 2005, he grows on his nursery, sending the seed around the world. His motivation in establishing the nursery was to preserve as many cultivars as possible. "People say to me that you can't conserve everything, and I think maybe not, but I can have a damn good try."

Thirty years of growing and studying the genus, of taking notes and keeping records, led to the publication by the RHS

of a monograph on *Lathyrus*. The book, written with Greg Kenicer, is a comprehensive description of the identification, botany and cultivation of the genus. A magisterial work, it is the definitive book on sweet peas. When pushed, Roger modestly acknowledges its importance. "Yes, to be honest, I am proud of the monograph. But we are not done yet. There are lots of new varieties to add."

For a plant to continue to appeal to new generations of gardeners, it has to be continually improved, and looking at breeding new ones is now the most important area of Roger's work. His seed bank is an invaluable resource in breeding new cultivars: it even contains 'Mrs Robert Bolton', one

of the cultivars in the Woolworths' seed packet that Roger first sowed. "I occasionally wonder how many more sweet peas the world can take, and each year I tell myself that there is always room for one more."

A huge number of cultivars were bred in the decades after 1945, but tastes change, and gardeners now want a wider range of colours or early flowering plants or flowers with longer stems. Commercial cut-flower growers are also now wanting to produce sweet peas and their requirements are very different from those of gardeners, so Roger and other breeders around the world are working hard to meet the challenge of breeding new cultivars. "There is plenty to keep me going for another 30 years." □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Lathyrus: The Complete Guide by Greg Kenicer and Roger Parsons (RHS, £40), and sweet pea seeds, ready to sow now, are available (mail order only) from Roger Parsons Sweet Peas. Tel 01243 673770, rpsweetpeas.com

