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Fig. 1 *Lathyrus odoratus* 'Flora Norton' at The Eden Project

## A short history of sweet peas

Colin Skelly

Sweet peas play a quintessential part in the English gardening calendar. The evocative scent of this annual climber is so familiar, such a staple of our collective horticultural consciousness, that they seem to have been here forever. It is difficult therefore to believe that sweet peas as we know them today are largely the result of breeding that only really got going in last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Eden Project in Cornwall has an annual exhibit which traces the development of the modern sweet pea in all its varieties. A summary of this is presented below.

The sweet pea is not native to these islands, but arrived here in 1699. It was sent by the monk and naturalist Francesco Cupani from Sicily to the English schoolmaster and horticulturist Robert Uvedale of Enfield, then a market town a day's walk

north of London. The seeds sent by Cupani were from wild populations of sweet pea, *Lathyrus odoratus*, which are endemic to the Mediterranean islands and southern Italy (fig. 2).

These new, strongly scented flowers were an immediate hit as a garden plant, but breeding progressed slowly at first. By 1731 there were a couple more cultivated varieties available, a white variety and the pink and white *Lathyrus odoratus* 'Painted Lady' (fig. 3). So rapid was the subsequent rise in popularity of the sweet pea that in 1778 it was noted in the *Botanical Magazine* that 'there is scarcely a plant more generally cultivated than the sweet pea'. At the close of the 18<sup>th</sup> century there were also scarlet, purple and black (probably dark purple) varieties available.

Things continued to move slowly, as new

introductions came about only when growers noted chance seedlings occurring as a result of mutations, or accidental cross-pollination. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century a limited number of new additions were available: blue, violet, and a new *L. o.* 'Painted Lady' (deep rose, pale rose and white), as well as a notable 'striped' variety introduced by James Carter in 1837. These striped varieties became what are now known as flaked sweet peas.



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Fig. 2 *Lathyrus odoratus* 'Cupani'



Fig. 3 *L. o.* 'Painted Lady'



Fig. 4 *Lathyrus nervosus*



Fig. 5 *L. o.* 'Henry Eckford', a Grandiflora sweet pea from 1906

Thereafter the pace of sweet pea introductions picked up, as seed merchants selected chance sports (naturally occurring differences from the parent plant) to grow on commercially for introduction to an expanding home gardening market. James Carter introduced the first 'yellow' sweet pea (really a cream colour) in 1860 and, in the same year, *L. o.* 'Blue Edged'. The latter sweet pea, originally raised by Major Trevor Clarke, was falsely claimed to be a hybrid of *Lathyrus odoratus* with the blue-flowered perennial species *L. nervosus* (fig. 4); nonetheless it won a Royal Horticultural Society First Class Certificate (RHS FCC) in 1883. It was not the first to do so however; that honour went to another Carter introduction, *L. o.* 'Scarlet Invincible' in 1867 (from peas raised originally by Steven Brown of Sudbury in 1865).

By 1881, 21 named varieties of sweet pea were available and, in 1883, Thomas Laxton won the RHS FCC for his *L. o.* 'Invincible Carmine', the first result of deliberate cross-pollination. Laxton was a plant hybridiser of repute, who corresponded with Charles Darwin on this subject, and introduced many new plants including several still-popular apples which bear his name. He also introduced many new sweet peas, but his name is not attached to these due to the

arrival on the scene of Henry Eckford.

Eckford transformed sweet pea breeding, introducing new varieties of what became known as the Grandiflora group (fig. 5). These had larger flowers in new colours, but retained the fragrance of the earlier sweet peas. Eckford is rightly famous for his role in sweet pea breeding, introducing many varieties that are still sold today as 'heirloom' or 'old-fashioned' cultivars, but he was also a very accomplished self-publicist. Laxton bred many similar sweet peas that he did not name, due to their similarity to Eckford's introductions. Synonymous introductions can be a problem when breeders bid to create novelty in a packed marketplace. By 1900 this was rapidly becoming the case with sweet peas, with cultivated varieties now numbering 264, of which 115 had been introduced by Eckford.

Sweet peas had also begun to be introduced from overseas: by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the USA, where Eckford's sweet peas were proving popular, was the source of some of the most successful new introductions (fig. 6). Many of these are still popular today, and mistakenly thought of as old English sweet peas, despite originating in the New World.

At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sweet peas had been in Britain for two hundred years, the occasion for a

bicentenary celebration at the Crystal Palace in 1900, and the formation of the National Sweet Pea Society. Yet the story of sweet-pea breeding was about to enter a radical new phase. This began in 1901 when Silas Cole, head gardener to Earl Spencer at Althorp Park, showed the sweet pea *L. o.* 'Countess Spencer' at the very first National Sweet Pea Society show in London. Cole's sweet pea had a larger flower than the Grandifloras, and wavy, ruffled standard petals, the result of a deliberate choice of *L. o.* 'Prima Donna' as one of the parents. *L. o.* 'Countess Spencer' caused a stir amongst the enthusiasts and breeders at the show, and sweet peas of this type became known as the Spencer type - still the most popular type of sweet pea today (fig. 7).

*L. o.* 'Prima Donna' does appear to have been the key to the creation of the Spencer type, because in 1901 a Mr. Viner of Frome also noted a similar larger-flowered, wavy-edged sport among his rows of *L. o.* 'Prima Donna'. He grew these on and sold the resulting plants to Henry Eckford who, despite this cultivar being smaller and less wavy than Cole's *L. o.* 'Countess Spencer', sold them under the same name. However, the value of both of these was diminished by the fact that they weren't stable, and regularly



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Fig. 6 *L. o.* 'Flora Norton', an American Grandiflora from 1904

produced a mix of sports, limiting their commercial success.

In 1902, cut-flower grower William Unwin also spotted a wavy-edged sport in his row of *L. o.* 'Prima Donna' sweet peas. After taking care to ensure that it came true from seed, he launched it as *L. o.* 'Gladys Unwin'. This cultivar, and others introduced by Unwin in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, were neither as large nor as wavy as *L. o.* 'Countess Spencer', but they were more reliable, providing the commercial basis for Unwin's Seeds, established in 1903.

Why did this wavy-edged new variety occur in three different places at the same time? Cole's claim to have deliberately bred the new cultivar is unlikely, and modern sweet pea breeder and expert Roger Parsons considers that the simultaneous discovery of this new variety can be put down to a single sport of

*L. o.* 'Prima Donna', where the seeds of that pod were distributed quite widely among growers. Regardless of how this new characteristic sprang up at about the same time in a number of different locations, *L. o.* 'Prima Donna' was soon seized upon by breeders hungry for sweet peas with attractive new attributes.

When Unwin crossed his new cultivar with Cole's Spencer types, and then back-crossed to the



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Fig. 7 *L. o.* 'Gwendoline', a Spencer sweet pea from 1999





Fig. 8 *L. o.* 'Theia-Bella', a Spencer from 2017

Grandifloras, he laid the basis for the success of the Spencer sweet pea. New Grandiflora introductions continued alongside the new Spencer and Unwin types, and the popularity of sweet peas grew even more. Testament to this enthusiasm were the 39,000 entries received for a competition for the best bunch of sweet peas, run by the *Daily Mail* in 1911, for a prize of £1,000 (equivalent to over £78,000 today).

Over time the long stems and larger flowers of the Spencers proved more popular. They became the dominant sweet pea type in

Britain for exhibition and as cut flowers, despite the fact that breeding for stem length, colour and flower size would sometimes be at the expense of scent (fig. 8).

Dwarf cultivars were first noticed in the US as sports of taller varieties. One was introduced in Britain in 1895 as *L. o.* 'White Cupid', and gave rise to a 'Cupid' series in different colours. But despite several re-introductions over the years in different series, dwarf sweet peas have never achieved the popularity of taller varieties. Intermediate crosses between dwarf

and Spencer types have proved more popular, first as the tendril-free *L. o.* 'Snoopea', and more recently in the 'New Century' and 'Astronaut' series.

In the USA, early or winter-flowering varieties have been popular, for instance the 'Christmas' and 'Winter Elegance' series, bred to bloom before the intense heat of North American summers in which Grandifloras and Spencers struggle. Other sweet pea series with these properties include 'Cuthbertson' and 'Royal' in the USA, and 'Gawler' in Australia.

Multiflora types, with eight or more flowers per stem, such as the 'Galaxy' series launched in the late 1950s, and the commercially successful 'Early Multiflora Gigantea' series in the 1960s, threatened to overtake the popularity of the Spencers, but ultimately failed to do so.

From the 1980s on, a range of new, modern Grandiflora types emerged, combining the longer stems of Spencer types with the powerful old-fashioned scent of the Grandifloras (fig. 9). Breeder Dr Keith Hammett is currently working on producing a yellow sweet pea (the one colour not yet achieved) by hybridising with a yellow and red-flowered species, *Lathyrus belinensis*. He has not succeeded in doing so as yet, but his efforts have nonetheless produced several garden-worthy introductions (fig. 10).

Interestingly, some of the older varieties have come back into fashion, with the oldest, *L. o.* 'Cupani's Orginal' (most descending from seed collected by Keith Hammett in Sicily in the 1970s) and *L. o.* 'Painted Lady' still widely available. The survival of many of these older varieties is made



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Fig. 9 *L. o.* 'Little Red Riding Hood', a Modern Grandiflora from 2012, bred by Dr Keith Hammett

possible by the fact that the flower structure promotes self-fertilisation. This means that seeds are generally true to the parent plant, and has allowed enthusiasts to conserve older varieties with little, if any, loss of vigour.

In fact though, many sweet pea varieties are modern recreations of an older variety rather than a direct descendant. *L. o.* 'Painted Lady', for example, is widely available as an heirloom variety but, while exhibiting the colours described in the early-18<sup>th</sup> century variety (perhaps more vibrantly in the modern version), have the increased vigour, flowers-per-stem and stem-length that were bred into the Grandifloras. A different example comes from the USA, where *L. o.* 'Blanche Ferry' was supposedly re-discovered as a sport of *L. o.*

'Pink Cupid' but, though it looks the part, does not exhibit the early flowering of the original late-19<sup>th</sup> century variety. The latter was developed unintentionally by a quarryman's wife in New York State who, over 25 years' re-sowing seed of *L. o.* 'Painted Lady' in her poor shallow soil, created a compact, self-supporting and earlier-flowering plant, the rights for which were bought by grower DM Ferry & Co.

As we enter the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, well into the sweet pea's fourth century in Britain, the Eden Project is telling its story in its outdoor gardens. The *Sense of History* exhibit chronicles mankind's interaction with some of our favourite garden plants. The journey of the sweet pea is told through a time-line of cultivated varieties, from 'Cupani's Orginal' (1699), through Eckford's Grandifloras, the Spencers and the modern Grandifloras. The story of these familiar garden plants is a long and complex one, involving constant selection of new and different varieties to meet the demands of the gardening market – a story that continues to unfold, at a pace that shows no signs of slowing down. 🌱



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Fig. 10 *Lathyrus x hammettii* 'Erewhon'

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