



PLANT NOW



## THE SWEETEST PEAS

*Usher in spring with the season's earliest (and best-smelling) flower.*

*By Johanna Silver*



*Erin Benzakein on her flower farm in Washington State*



BUY SEEDS OF BENZAKEIN'S 30 FAVORITE CULTIVARS AT FLORETFLOWERS.COM

One of Erin Benzakein's earliest childhood chores was snipping sweet peas out of her great-grandparents' garden in Walla Walla, Washington, to put in vases. Now a flower farmer and floral designer in Washington's Skagit Valley, she does the exact same work, with dialed-up hours (sunup to sundown) and on a larger patch of land (2 planted-to-the-brim acres). Of the 170 types of flowers she cultivates on her farm, Floret Flowers ([floretflowers.com](http://floretflowers.com)), sweet peas are still prized. "Every year, I think I've grown them all, but I always find dozens more," says Benzakein, who works directly with breeders in England and New Zealand to grow sweet peas with longer stems, more weather-resistant blooms, and unusual hues. "There are some crazy psychedelic colors that are coming out right now," she adds. Here, Benzakein offers her favorite varieties of the fragrant cool-season flowers, plus tips for growing success.

## GROWING TIPS

### SOW SEEDS

Soak sweet-pea seeds for 12 to 24 hours before sowing into 4-inch pots. This softens the outer shell and speeds up germination from two weeks to five to seven days.

### PREP SOIL

While waiting for seeds to sprout, prepare growing beds. Benzakein adds a 2- to 4-inch layer of compost into any bed but gives sweet peas a boost: "I run a 12-inch-deep trench down the center of the bed and fill it with compost so once the sweet peas send roots down, there's a feast awaiting them below."

### MAKE TRELLISES

Drive wood or metal posts roughly 8 feet apart and attach chicken wire for the flowers to climb.

### SET IRRIGATION

Run soaker hoses alongside the seedlings. "Without the hoses, keeping their thirst quenched in warm weather can be a full-time chore," she says.

### PLANT

Set out seedlings around the time of the last frost in two rows, one on either side of the trellis, roughly 8 inches apart.

### FEED & MAINTAIN

Feed a weekly dose of fish emulsion and kelp, stopping once the vines explode into lush growth. To ensure straight stems, secure plants to the trellis with twine weekly.

### HARVEST

Every other morning, pick stems that have at least 2 unopened flowers at the tip. "The more you harvest, the more they flower," she says.



ADD SUGAR TO THE WATER TO MAKE FLOWERS LAST LONGER

**> FLOWER DELIVERY**

Previous page: A vintage metal jar carrier overflows with blooms, including cream and pink 'Mollie Rilstone', pink 'Nora Holman', fiery red 'Restormel', orange-pink 'Valerie Harrod', and pure white 'White Frills'.

**> FIELD OF DREAMS**

Above: Benzakein maximizes her sweet-pea output by growing plants in the greenhouse and the field (they'll also grow happily in the average home garden bed). Here, a mix of 'Charlie's Angel',

'Jilly', and 'North Shore' ramble up archway trellising made from T-posts and bamboo canes.

**> ON THEIR OWN**

Left: Sweet peas come in a wild spectrum of colors, from blues to reds, as seen in this arrangement of 'Eclipse', 'Ethel Grace', 'Joyce Stanton', 'Nimbus', 'North Shore', and 'Our Harry'. The flowers have the strongest fragrance and longest vase life if they're harvested early in the morning, before temperatures heat up.

## FAVORITE VARIETIES

Of the 100-plus sweet peas Benzakein has trialed, these are some of her top picks.

**'CHARLIE'S ANGEL'**

Blossoms make this variety one of the most popular on the show benches in England.

**'JILLY'**

Blooms are the loveliest shade of cream, making this a multi-award-winning choice.

**'MOLLIE RILSTONE'**

Creamy, blush-tinted blooms that have a strong fruity scent atop long, tall stems.

**'NIMBUS'**

The inky gray petals with eggplant purple stripes win for uniqueness.

**'RESTORMEL'**

Scarlet-cerise petals of this large-flowered variety are excellent for cutting and highly fragrant.

**'VALERIE HARRÖD'**

Petals are a brilliant glowing orange-pink, resembling un-ripe watermelon.



**GET GROWING!**

For tips on bringing all kinds of blooms into your garden, snag Benzakein's new book, *Floret Farm's Cut Flower Garden* (Chronicle Books, 2017; \$30).

FROM TOP: CHRIS BENZAKEIN, MICHELE M. WAITE