

Sweet Pea Diary August 2009 to July 2010 by John Markham In recent years, both the RHSI and the Parks Department of Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council have been pooling their resources to organise a Sweet Pea & Rose Display in the Orangery of the Walled Garden at Marlay Park, Rathfarnham, Dublin.

The Council painstakingly restored the 4.5 acre garden and it is now laid out and planted in the Regency style. Converting the Orangery into a display space for RHSI members and Affiliated Societies to exhibit sweet pea and roses adds yet another dimension to this gem of a garden, which is well worth a visit in its own right. The Parks Department also provides live music during the Display afternoons, further enhancing the magic of the occasion.

To add even more interest, I have scripted a sweet pea growing diary, which hopefully will encourage members, their gardening friends and families to visit this year's Display on July 17 & 18 (Saturday and Sunday). For those of you with small children in tow, I am reliably informed that the playground in Marlay Park is top of the range.

First thought to the reason why one attempts to grow sweet pea to exhibition standard. There is something wonderfully satisfying in growing any species to a high standard and it brings with it a great sense of achievement. The grower has to put in several hours each week and really has to place his or her flowers on a show bench just to see how they compare with those of the 'masters'. And we are fortunate to have a number of sweet pea 'master growers' in the Greater Dublin area: Tony Boston, Chairperson of the Dublin 5 Horticultural Society, Maria Melvin and Oliver Clarke, Chairperson and Vice-Chair respectively of Rush Horticultural Society, John Warren, Show Secretary, Malahide Horticultural Society and Chris McAleer, current All-Ireland Sweet Pea Champion and member of Balbriggan Horticultural Society. As for yours truly, I would regard myself as an aspirant in this company. All going well, these master growers should be along to Marlay Park in mid-July and there will hardly be a knife-edge between our respective sweet pea vases.

DIARY

10 August 2009: I appraised the performance of the cultivars grown by me during the past season, noted the cultivars that consistently did well at the National Sweet Pea Shows in the UK and ordered the following seed from specialist suppliers: 60 seeds of 'Valerie Harold', 'Gwendoline', 'White Frills' and 'Bristol'; 40 seeds of 'Anniversary' and 'Windsor'. Later, Chris McAleer sent me 20 seed of his new variety, 'Mrs Bridget McAleer', which he has just submitted for certification.

22 November: After soaking overnight, 62 'Bristol' and 60 'Valerie Harold' seed were sown in a 3:1 peat/seed potting compost/vermiculite mix. These were sown in seed cells which were packed the previous day, soaked and left to drain overnight. The seed was covered with the dry

compost/vermiculite mix and placed in trays with a couple of centimetres of dry peat lining the base. The trays were placed in an electric propagator.

28 November - 7 December: On each of these days the cells were examined and any seedlings showing were pushed up gently and potted into Rootainers (32 cells per tray, 12 cm / 5" in depth) using the 3:1 mix; 52 seedlings of each variety emerged. The remainder were removed from the propagator on 7 December but left in the glasshouse, where night temperature was maintained at +5°. The final turnout was 57 and 54 seedlings respectively. On 9 December these seedlings were moved out under glass cloches, with customary slug prevention measures. From then on, these seedlings under cloches and those which follow were watered well twice weekly and slug activity closely monitored.

7 December: 62 'White Frills' and 56 'Gwendoline' seeds sown as before.

13 - 23 December: 45 'White Frills' and 42 'Gwendoline' seedlings were potted on. The weather was extremely cold and I delayed until 26 December before moving them under cloches

23 December: 42 'Anniversary', 41 'Windsor' and 20 'Mrs Bridget McAleer' seeds sown.

29 December - 8 January: 40 'Windsor', 42 'Anniversary' and 9 'Mrs Bridget McAleer' seedlings were potted on. I recorded a couple of nights at -3°C and one night at -4.3°C minimum temperatures on the thermometer in the centre of the tillage area; during those days I recorded only one minimum temperature over 0°C, which was +2°C on the morning of 3 January. Soil under the cloches remained friable and seedlings looked OK.

13 January 2010: Much milder, moved 40 'Windsor', 42 'Anniversary' and 9 'Mrs Bridget McAleer' out under cloches.

26 January: It was -1.6°C minimum temperature overnight. Seedling progress slow, many showing first leaf. I watered them well, replenished the slug control measures and left watering and caretaking duties in the hands of Ken Townsend, a neighbour, while we were away for several weeks.

5 March: Returned home to sunny days but still very cold overnight conditions. Growth has been remarkably slow in our absence. Ken has been watering every three days with a half scoop of feed in a full watering can for the past few weeks. Normally compost will leach nutrients after 6 weeks or so. To avoid the seedlings having a setback I included the feed. (See photo 4 of seedlings, taken on our return.) The next step will be to pinch them at the third leaf stage (they should have reached it weeks ago). Ground preparation, digging, removal of first spit, turning second spit, barrows full of garden compost, generous portion of peat moss (our sandy soil requires me to take measures to retain moisture) and selection of the strongest seedlings should follow in the coming couple of weeks.

15th March: Weather milder, cloches removed during the day, continued watering.

18th March: Some growth noticeable, leader in each plant pinched.

8th April: During the first mild day the Sweet Pea area was dug, the first spit removed from an area 50 cms (20") wide, the second spit turned in 1.5 metre lengths at a time, returned 8 to 10 cms (3" - 4") of top spit, spread a good barrow of garden compost, spread peat (circa 5 cms 2") and returned circa 5 cms of top spit. This has been my standard practice for several years but this year two neighbours helped out.

9th April: Another fine dry day, bed raked and a light dressing of 7:6:17 fertiliser incorporated. A line was laid 20 cms (8") off centre, soil marked at 15 cms (6") intervals, the row planted with the sturdiest 28 plants of Valerie Harrod, 28 Bristol, 15 Windsor, 4 Bridget McAleer, first firmed in by hand, then by foot on inside, watered well and slug protection measures taken.

10th April: The second row of 28 Gwendoline, 28 White Frills, 15 Anniversary and 4 Bridget McAleer were planted.

1st May: All plants examined, the sturdiest side-shoot selected, all others cut out with a scissors.

8th May: A line was placed 25 cms (10") off centre and a 240 cm (8') cane inserted opposite the half-way mark between each pair of plants, then tied in near the top to a horizontal cane, each row was firmed on the outside by foot.

9th May: The early plants were "ringed", all side-shoots and tendrils pinched out and each plant supported by a 'plant ring'. "Ringing" then undertaken every third day.

13th May: Good weeding, light dressing of 7:6:17,

22nd May: Flower stems with 2 and 3 florets were pinched to encourage 4's to form; low night-time temperatures cause "bud drop".

10th June: Weeding, dressed lightly with Sulphate of Potash.

26th June: Insufficient quality stems to exhibit seriously at Delgany & District Horticultural Society's Rose Show. Entries were low due to bud drop and John Warren, Malahide, 1st in all five classes.

4th July: Remarkably good weather for previous week; two 1st and one 2nd awards took McAleer Cup for most points at Balbriggan Show. Chris McAleer, Balbriggan, had best exhibit.

11th July: Fine humid weather resulted in a 'bucket' of flowers being cut each evening of previous week. Heavy rain on Friday and marked deterioration in bloom quality resulted in a couple of 3rd awards at Rush Show. Chris McAleer held on to the All Ireland Sweet Pea Championship with vases of Bridget McAleer, Valerie Harrod, Glasnevin and Gwendoline. Maria Melvin won the Rush Championship.

18th July: Plants are close to the top of the canes. After Marlay Park I "layered" them, removed rings from bottom up, layed them along the ground and began training them up another cane further along the row. Watering and ringing will continue into late August but from now on.