

## A Houston gardener shares love with sweet peas

Molly Glentzer April 17, 2020



Art dealer Hiram Butler tends a garden full of trellises that are covered with sweet pea blossoms on Thursday, April 16, 2020 in Houston. He's been cutting and delivering the flowers to friends, neighbors and shut-ins to, he says, add some cheer in people's lives during the coronavirus shelter-in-place orders. He's made more than 100...  
Photo: Brett Coomer, Houston Chronicle / Staff Photographer

Hiram Butler's best sweet pea harvest in years arrived about the time he temporarily closed his art gallery in Houston's Jackson Hill neighborhood to comply with COVID-19 pandemic protocols.

He could have filled his house with the old-fashioned flowers, infusing every room with their cheerful fragrance, which balances sweet and spice. But sweet peas are sort of genetically programmed to be shared. "They last much longer if you harvest flowers every day," Butler says. "If you leave them on the vine, they go to seed."

He bought a case of small glassware from a restaurant supply store and began taking sweet peas to friends. He has lived and worked in Houston for at least 50 years, so he has a lot of

friends. Some are quite elderly. Some are struggling with isolation. Those friends got sweet peas first.

Then he took sweet peas to his doctors. He took sweet peas to all the artists he represents. He took sweet peas to the parents of friends and artists. He took sweet peas to all of his neighbors.

Everybody he could think of, he surprised with a delivery. “Except friends who live in gated communities, because I couldn’t get in,” he says. “I’m telling them they need to move. Who are they really keeping out?”

Butler estimates he delivered at least 100 little vases of sweet peas during the first month of the pandemic shutdown, venturing to parts of town he hadn’t seen in years.

People started posting pictures of them on Facebook. It didn’t escape Butler’s sharp eyes that the glasses often were placed near pictures of loved ones. Sweet peas tend to evoke memories of grandparents, he says, “and you can’t buy them from a florist.”

Growing up in Eagle Pass way back when, Butler and his sister carried bouquets of sweet peas from their mother’s garden to a ritual at the Episcopal church every Easter that culminated underneath a huge black cross. “I never forgot the scent. It was amazing,” he says. About 25 years ago during a hiking trip to the Swiss Alps, Butler saw and smelled sweet peas growing from window boxes in every village he passed, and decided he needed to grow them, too.



Photo: Brett Coomer, Houston Chronicle / Staff Photographer

He followed the planting instructions on the seed packets he bought, poking the dried, pea-like seeds into soil in spring, after the danger of frost had passed. The vines withered and wouldn't flower. This happened for three years, until fortuitously, Butler saw that a Vietnamese neighbor had beautiful sweet peas on a chain link fence. "Please," he begged, "you have to show me how to do this."

The fix was simple: The seed packet instructions were written, as they almost always are, for gardeners in colder climates. In Houston, sweet peas need to be in the ground by February, so they can produce flowers before the weather heats up. Assuming they don't freeze. Butler can't control the weather. For whatever reason, last year he had no crop at all.

Butler is as fastidious with his sweet peas as he is with the placement of objects in the new home he built a few years ago and his famously spare gallery. Earlier this week, the plants seemed to be all about the vining greenery, which clambered up four, 12-foot trellises, twining itself into a vertical bramble. You had to look close to find the flowers, which are not showy from a distance. Sweet pea blossoms are intimate things, deceptively simple with a few thin, whirly petals that look like a line of pastel dancing skirts clustered on delicate stems.

Along with a face mask and gloves, Butler wore a hat for sun protection while he harvested. The weather was warming. He could see this year's vines were on their way out. "Today or tomorrow is probably the end," he said.

Still, a year like this.

His house might not have filled with sweet peas, but sweet thank-yous had stacked up. Some people had nearly cried when they opened their doors to find his bouquets. They'll never forget this year's harvest. Neither will he.