

Herbaria 3.0

Everyone has a story to tell about a plant. What's yours?

SWEET PEAS

by Donna Williams

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I am struggling to paint a bouquet of sweet peas. Picked this morning from my back garden, straight cat-tongue-hair stems that hold lacy light blossoms, self-possessed yet playful. The perfume, the perfume! Alberta honey and a daughter's love. I mix cadmium with violet but it's too dark for the near-transparent purple petals. I try alizarin crimson and terra vert, an earthy green, with titanium white, and get an insipid mauve, way too heavy for the whisper of lavender in the blooms before me. Pale-centered lipstick-pink blossoms fail as well, as I mix a colour akin to candyfloss. The edge of each petal I attempt protests with a snarl instead of an upturned lip. I study the leaves, green and basic, then tempt the tendrils of vine onto canvas, but my strokes are inept for the light curls that reach

and twirl or stand poised mid-air, a hand halted in mid-sentence. I have no difficulty painting peonies in generous blooms, or daisies in quick conversations, or even roadside flowers thick with summer colour, but these sweet peas. They betray me.

I stop and remember sweet peas. Dropping my bike on Orcas Island to a field of wild mauve, perplexed when the thousands of flowers hold only a trace of scent. My first apartment - a brick-walled walk-up called The Riviera which it was nowhere near and anything but - with its chain link fence and alley patch of scrubby soil that managed magnificent frills of sweet peas, and which begot thank-yous from both neighbours and bottle-pickers. The roof of my house flattened by an ancient leafy poplar on a windless day, on the due date of my second child, and how my mom picked a vase of rich-veined Royal Family from her garden as an apology. Then my daughter - whom I call Sweetpea.

I think of the trailing knee-highs I've planted in pots, the bending over for inhales, and the inhales at random front gardens. The watercolour from Salt Spring Island that I rolled and stowed in a panier, now framed across from my bed where I wake to Cheshire blue flowers morphing to cobalt butterflies. Or the intensely fragrant amethyst-hued sweet peas a florist flew to Calgary from Amsterdam in the coldest of Marchs, that I placed next to the hospice pillow for my dear Dutch friend, Ariana - I can't remember now if she knew they were there. Finally, the British and vivid magenta sweet pea named Milly, named after the daughter of a family friend who was snatched and murdered on her walk home from school in the UK.

I lay my brush down.

The canvas will sit on the easel in my glassed-in front porch for nearly a year. Front yard hostas will wither from the fall air and winter will draw itself on the panes in frosted faces, until spring brings curly lilacs and a yard of riotous dandelions. A month later than usual, I push sweet pea nuggets into dull dry dirt in front of the garage and think of my grandma.

Her sweet peas would climb high among the argyle of green twine that my grandpa wove behind a greenhouse he built from discarded windows, whose frames were, yes, painted green. If anyone asked him what colour of green, he would have grinned, and said dark. Greene, my grandma's maiden name, the family that gave her a sizeable nose and a six-foot frame, whose near-sighted eyes could shoot a rifle dead straight, who was famous for blue saskatoon pies and fragrant ginger cookies. Her farm-girl-self grew a garden glorious with dutiful

marigolds protecting rows of carrots and golden beets, rainbows of Swiss chard and tom-thumb tomatoes atop a compost of eggshells and coffee grounds. Her sweet peas, snow-white, violet, crimson, and lavender, were the colour of her peonies and petunias, geraniums, and clematis. Her garden, so obvious now, was my first palate of colour.

My grandmother is gone. My daughter - my sweetest pea - is grown. My mom in her dementia no longer grows a garden. And today, a cherished friend a city away tells me she fled her marriage in the middle of the night, her bravery born, she says, with the promise of spring. I walk to the easel in the glassed-in porch, determined to finish this in-limbo painting as a nod to life's imperfection, and the tenacity to overcome what stalls us. I massage the tubes of paint and loosen stuck lids. Tentatively, I coax the petals alive with a translucent kiss of vermillion and from memory, add a few unfurling buds for promise. Enough.

I send my cherished friend the canvas. She writes me back, not to say she loves the painting, but to tell me she loves sweet peas. Their gentle scent. That she misses her mom who used to hang strings from the tips of the worn fence of the rental where she grew up. Strings for the vines to grab, and to grow.

I confess I didn't know her connection to sweet peas. But perhaps that's the sweet pea. The ubiquitous blossom of alleys and back gardens, of fields and ditches and worn-down railings. The not-so-sweet pea, the bittersweet sweet pea, the tissue-thin flower with the power to twist and twine and dance and divine its way into our memory. A fragrance able to evoke; to hold regret, loss, death, and love. To ultimately soothe. Perhaps my struggle to paint sweet peas and their reluctance to be painted, is as it should be, a flower uncaptured - wilful blooms best inhaled, held by hand, and kept close in the heart.

Donna Williams is a Calgary based writer and lover of flowers, especially sweet peas



Sweet Pea (*Lathyrus odorata* L.) collected in a grain field in Chemawa, OR in 1917 by J.C. Nelson. Image credit: **Harvard University Herbaria.**