



SWEET PEA

Latin: *Lathyrus odoratus*

The Sweet Pea, known to many as 'The Queen of the Annuals', originated on the island of Sicily and was introduced into this country at the end of the C17th as a result of the friendship between two botanists, the one a Franciscan monk, the other an English schoolmaster.

In 1699 the Franciscan Brother Francis Cupani (1657-1710) sent seeds of the Sweet Pea growing wild in Sicily to Robert Uvedale (1642-1722) master of Enfield Grammar School, botanist and horticulturalist. By the 1720s the deeply scented blooms were being recommended for growing in London gardens.

Brother Cupani also sent seeds to the Dutch physician and botanist Caspar Commelin (1668-1731) in Amsterdam.

Cupani was a student of the natural sciences, director of the botanical gardens at Misilmeri, near Palermo and the author of *Hortus Catholicus* (1696) in which he describes the wild Sweet Pea (subsequently named 'Cupani') with its two small, bicolour flowers per stem. It seems that Uvedale wrote to Cupani to congratulate him on the publication of the *Hortus Catholicus* and Uvedale's interest in propagating new species would have encouraged Brother Cupani to send him seeds.

Cupani established a binomial classification of plants in his herbarium Hortus Siccus, but it was Carl Linnaeus who gave the plant its botanical name *Lathyrus odoratus*.

It is from the original 'Cupani' Sweet Pea, with its intense fragrance and deep maroon petals with violet 'wings' that all modern, grandiflora varieties are descended.

John Keats in his poem *Hyperion* writes of 'sweet peas on tip-toe for a flight', an evocative image of the delicate 'Cupani' flowers with which he would have been familiar.

