

SWEET PEA CULTURE IN STRATFORD.

By E. A. OSMOND, STRATFORD, TARANAKI.

Soil and Climate.—In this district enthusiasts have to contend with soil and climatic conditions which are far from being ideal. The soil, however suited for the growth of grass, is too light for horticulturists, and the rainfall is much too heavy. The staple soil of Central Taranaki, being a volcanic deposit of pumice covered with about six inches of vegetable mould, is practically destitute of phosphates, and although it contains a high percentage of nitrogenous material, is not in itself suitable for the higher cultivation of sweet peas.

Trenching.—In order to ameliorate this condition, I excavate the ground three feet deep and three feet wide, removing all soil from the trench and using virgin soil and compost to build up the beds. At the bottom cow manure is lightly forked in, and soils are placed on top, then more cow manure with "blood and bone." The process is repeated in the next layer, with the addition of a handful of superphosphate to each yard of row, and so on until the trench is filled in to within nine inches of the top. The trench is then well trodden on, and is filled up with a very rich compost of well-rotten cow-manure and sifted soil thoroughly incorporated.

Sowing.—For exhibition purposes I sow in nine-inch pots, six seeds to each pot. The pots are put out into a cold frame, the floor being first well covered with lime to prevent the ingress of slugs and snails. Very little water is used, only just sufficient to keep the soil moist, until the young shoots appear. As the plants grow the quantity of water may be increased, but the greatest care must be taken that the delicate growths do not receive too much moisture. The plants remain in the cold frame until they are about six inches high, when they are hardened off. It is very important that the plants should be thoroughly hardy in order that they may suffer very little check in transplanting.

Erection of Framework.—My vines are grown on pig-wire netting (4-inch mesh) in rows running north and south. The framework is erected to allow the vines to climb about ten feet high. The posts are spaced ten feet apart, and each post

should be either tarred or charred before being put into the ground, as I have noticed in some instances that the fungoid diseases which attack the wood also affect the roots of those vines that are in close proximity to the post. The netting is hung close to the ground, but some growers hang it from six to nine inches above the plants to allow for earthing up.

Planting Out.—In transplanting, the plants should be spaced two feet in a line on the same side of the netting, and allowed to remain undisturbed, making plenty of root action, until they commence to climb. I then apply half an ounce of nitrate of soda in solution to each plant as a stimulant.

Thinning and Tying.—Growers will have noticed that at this stage of growth the plants stool out and form several shoots. I get to work with a pruning-knife, and selecting three to four main laterals, cut away everything else. The check plants receive I consider to be beneficial. These main laterals are trained fan-fashion across the netting, being tied into position with raffia tape. All cross growths are removed as they appear, and a few subsidiary laterals are encouraged from the bottom. It is difficult to explain in writing the exact method adopted in thinning, and possibly very few growers know how to carry it out, but it is essential for successful cultivation if one wishes to exhibit that the vines should be light and airy. In experimenting, I have found that by judicious pruning of these superfluous growths the main stems are strengthened and quality is added to the blooms. It is unfortunate that there are no text books detailing this most important operation, and there probably will be none until that great grower, Mr. T. Jones, of Ruabon, takes us into his confidence.

Stopping.—By this I mean the nipping out of the growth above the set bloom, intended for exhibition. I cannot say that I have been over-successful with this process. My experience is, that although the stems come longer and the blooms are larger after stopping, there is a tendency to coarseness and deformity. Possibly experiments in this direction are nevertheless worth carrying out.

Feeding.—During the growing period I give two or three applications of liquid cow-manure and soot, breaking it down until it is the colour of light beer. When the vines come into bud I apply Macreath's Special Sweet Pea Manure, according to directions, and follow this up twice a week with two dressings of liquid cow-manure and soot. Ten days prior to exhibiting I give the final application, this time using Macreath's. (Note.—With some varieties no artificial manures should be used, as it causes spotting and debase colour; Paradise Ivory, Elsie Herbert, and Evelyn Hemms in particular.)

Watering.—It is difficult to lay down

any hard and fast rule about watering, as the climatic conditions vary so much in this country. Growers must be guided by the appearance of the soil and vines. Personally, when it is necessary to water I only do so of an evening when the sun is off the vines, and then give a copious supply. Where possible, use soft rain-water, but if that is not available, and only the town supply can be got, keep the water off the vines and apply solely to the roots.

Shading.—When I deem it advisable to provide shade, I cover the vines with well-washed scrim about seven days before requiring the blooms. It is necessary that the scrim should be thoroughly washed, as otherwise the first shower of rain will bring out the dressing and cause the blooms to be very badly spotted.

ALL ABOUT SWEET PEAS.

Mr. Robert Sydenham, of Birmingham, one of the leading specialists in England, has just issued in handy book form at a nominal price, his fifth edition of "All About Sweet Peas." The booklet should be welcomed by all sweet pea growers as, in addition to giving a description of every known sweet pea on the market to-day, it has an article on "How to grow



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HOW THE PEAS ARE SHADED.

These fine sweet peas, some of the plants being 14 feet in height, were grown by Mr. G. C. Holder, Porirua, near Wellington.