

# PEAS - AND KIDS

I've owned houses with big yards in Philadelphia and in Louisville, Ky. I spent a total of 17 years with abundant space, water, and rich soil. In all those years, I never managed to grow sweet peas, which, next to the peony, are my favorite flower.

Sweet peas have been a favorite ever since someone gave me a small vase of these fragrant blooms when I left the banking world to enter the culinary world. I loved the soft colors and the green tendrils spiraling through the bouquet. I was determined to cultivate my own.

A house with a yard is about promise. Not too long after I got that bouquet, we bought our first house. It was a week before our first son was born. I had big plans for my family and for a garden. I'd care well for both.

I think sweet peas are supposed to be relatively easy to raise. The seeds are some of the first you can push into the ground when the frost releases its wintry grip and the soil softens. Each spring for the six years we lived there, I tried to grow sweet peas. Each year, they sprouted in the cool months, but the heat or the rabbits - or my benign neglect - did them in before I ever saw a blossom.

Fifteen months after Sam was born, Ian was born. My sweet peas withered as I cared for my children - and, sometimes, felt overwhelmed by them. Maybe kids and a garden were too much.

But a move to Louisville brought renewed hope. A better job for my husband, a bigger house, and a bigger yard - one surrounded by a lovely wrought-iron fence perfect for the climbing tendrils of sweet peas. And so I began again, always pushing the hard seeds into the soft earth near the fence, where I hoped they'd be protected. I couldn't help myself. The seed aisles of the home improvement stores offered such promise.

But life was the same. Bryn, our daughter, was born nearly two years after we moved in. The boys were growing; their challenges were growing. I felt I wasn't always succeeding as a wife, a mother, or a writer.

I watched every year as the shoots broke through the earth - and then my busy routine would take over again. Sometime in late May I'd remember the sweet peas. I'd find them, withered and browned - vines that never fulfilled their potential.

Yet another move has brought us to south Florida, where I don't think sweet peas would stand a chance. Besides, we live in an apartment with no land.

My boys are now 17 and 16; Bryn is 10. I look back and wonder who that young mother was with so many ideas, plans, and hopes for her kids and her garden.

My failure with the sweet peas makes me wonder if I was distracted from caring for my kids, too. Did I let the sheer volume of things going on distract me from nurturing them, the way I let things dis-



TAMMY LJUNGBLAD/THE KANSAS CITY STAR/AP

**PRETTY IN PINK:** P.J. Christman runs through a field of peonies at a 4-acre farm in Kansas City, Mo., which features more than 160 varieties of the popular perennial.

tract me from growing sweet peas? Did I keep them from living up to their full potential?

I recently went through some boxes that were crowding our apartment. There were photos in them, little bits and pieces of schoolwork by the boys, and cards they had made when I was the coolest thing in their world.

Those days seem so distant now that we've weathered a few teenage storms - some poor choices and bad grades. Maybe too much pressure - or too little - from my husband and me. Angry words have been spoken on all sides.

Now I wonder if I paid enough attention to my marriage and my role as the great mom and helpful partner I thought I'd be. Or, I worry, did I act as I had with the sweet peas? Did I let life get in the way of caring for my most precious plants, my family?

But then I remember my best success in the garden. My other favorite flower, the peony. They're hardy perennials that come in brilliant colors, soft colors, and multi-

colors, with layers of ruffled petals.

I planted several peonies when we moved into our Kentucky home. They got the same amount of - or lack of - care as the sweet peas.

But every spring, despite my benign neglect, I'd soon see the fat green pods that were to become the flowers, covered by ants that loved them and that seemed to be integral to their blooming, even though I didn't know how. And those flowers would always unfold in full glory, each year getting stronger, larger, and showier.

I like to think that my kids, my marriage, and my life are more like those peonies than they are like the sweet peas.

In spite of some of the things I do - or don't do - my marriage and my family keep unfolding with new life, sometimes changed, sometimes not quite what I expected, but stubbornly sticking with me no matter what.

That's the kind of flower I want in my garden. That's the kind of flower I want in my life.

**Barbara Freda**