

# Plant Annuals for Continuous Blooms

Annual flowers can be a prime source of color to accent and enliven a home's landscape. A wide range of colors, sizes and species adapted to either sun or shade make it possible to plant annual flowers almost anywhere. Annuals are perfect for beds, borders, rock gardens, window boxes, hanging baskets, or as temporary groundcovers. Properly cared for, many annuals will brighten the landscape continuously from spring until frost kills them in the fall. Of course you can always replace those summer annuals with cold hardy annuals such as pansies. Annual vines can be used to cover trellises, provide shade and soften harsh fencing. Many produce flowers good for cutting and drying. Few plants offer as much diversity in landscape use as annuals do. Annuals are non-woody plants that complete their life cycle in a single growing season, ending with seed production. The terms "hardy," and "half-hardy," and "tender" are frequently applied to annuals. Hardy annuals are those which withstand freezing temperatures. The most popular hardy annual grown here is the pansy which, planted in the fall, provides fall, winter and spring color. Most hardy annuals, including pansies, are not very heat tolerant and usually die with the onset of hot summer temperatures. Half-hardy

(sometimes called cool-season) annuals are those which grow best under cool temperatures and may withstand light frost. Examples include annual phlox, snapdragons and calendula. They usually decline in the midsummer heat, but may bloom again strongly in the late summer or fall. Tender (sometimes called summer) annuals such as begonia, vinca, zinnias, and impatiens are not frost tolerant and, in fact, usually grow poorly at low temperatures. Confusion can arise when an annual plant reseeds itself and appears to have a perennial habit.

Why would you choose annuals if they require more replanting? What are the benefits of annuals? Here are some of the arguments with a little elaboration. Annuals are an excellent way to draw attention to buildings and home entrance ways. They provide visitors with pleasing "up-close" visual and sometimes fragrant experiences.

Since annuals like marigolds are born, grow, bloom and die in one year, they are more labor intensive than plants that bloom year after year. Compared to most perennial landscape plants, however, annuals require higher levels of maintenance. The availability of these plants is a benefit as these are big favorites in the spring and garden centers carry a wide variety with different heights, colors and textures. Since they are often already in bloom when they are purchased, the gardener can easily visualize the appearance of the garden with their addition.

Annuals bloom more quickly and continue to bloom and grow all through their season. They can be deadheaded and new blossoms will form, making for long lasting color and texture in the garden. The whole job of annuals is to produce seed so if spent flowers are removed, new flowers are continuously generated so seeds will be set. They are versatile, easy to grow and relatively inexpensive. A drawback to this is that lots of the plant's energy is spent on the flower and not on the root growth necessary for establishment. Flowers should be pinched off when planting for quicker establishment but that is hard to do. If some of the annuals purchased fail to thrive, they can be ripped out and more annuals replanted. If you don't like them once they're in your garden, you haven't invested a lot of money and you're not stuck with them for good. They can be replaced at the end of the season. Any planting can be changed each growing season, creating an entirely new design.

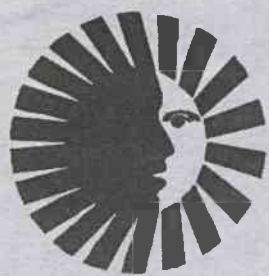
Before planting, the physical characteristics of the site should be evaluated. Consider the sites' soil type, fertility, drainage, and its exposure to sun. An annual plant well adapted to the site conditions they are chosen for will grow and flower more vigorously and has fewer pest problems.

Annual flowers generally require 1 to 1 1/2 inches of water each week. There are, however, some plants for those hot dry spots. Lantana was the plant of choice for these spots in commercial

plantings last year. Be sure water penetrates to the root zone. Soaker hoses are the most efficient because there is very little runoff, and evaporation and soil compaction are slight. Besides water, annuals also need additional fertilizer. Poor performance of annuals can often be traced to inadequate nutrition. General purpose granular fertilizers applied at planting will not last the entire season. An annual flower planting may require additional fertilizer during the growing season, one pound per 100 square feet of 10-10-10 every 4 to 6 weeks. Sprinkle the fertilizer lightly along the row and scratch it into the soil. Slow release fertilizers, while more expensive than conventional fertilizer, reduce the need for supplemental applications of fertilizers.

Another task that is a must when keeping annuals at their best is to pinch off faded blooms at least weekly. This will stimulate blooming throughout the season. Trailing plants can be pruned to keep the plants compact and stimulate additional blooming. Last, but not least, a 2-3 inch layer of mulch should be applied to annuals to keep down weeds and conserve moisture. Take care to only place about a 1/2 inch of mulch around the crown of these plants.

A well designed landscape should improve the market value of the home and add to the family's enjoyment of the home environment. Updating an old landscape can take years off the apparent age of the house.



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