Annuals for Summer Color

by Sara Williams, UC Master Gardener

Trees are the backbone of our landscaping, next in importance are shrubs, then perennials, and last but not least are annuals. Annuals can be used to fill in bare spots bringing color and excitement. They can be used as a border to define a "special area". Try using them over your bulb bed to cover the stalks from your spent spring flowering bulbs.

When deciding what annuals to plant consider our climate zone; most of us are in zones 8 or 9. The zone number is often listed on the seed packet or plant label. How much sun does the area receive, have we chosen a color scheme? How high and how wide will the mature plant be? What type of soil do we have, is it sandy, clay, or do we have a nice rich loam? How will we irrigate our new plants? Be sure to include some cutting flowers!

Summer annuals may evoke pleasant memories from our past. Walking with my maternal grandmother through my mother's garden is my earliest memory. It was early evening, just at twilight and we were looking at her flowers. Mother always grew bachelor buttons, amaranth, zinnias and four o'clocks around the edge of her vegetable garden. As an adult I have grown all of these and these flowers still bring back that nostalgic memory.

The most economical way to have summer color of course is to plant seeds. For an early start, sow seeds indoors in trays or pots approximately 6 to 8 weeks before the end of the frost season. Some seeds grow better sown directly in the soil after the danger of frost is past; check the seed packet for instructions. Most gardeners in our area want fast color and are willing to bear the extra expense of buying bedding plants from a local nursery. Choose your plants wisely and consider the season. I have visited several nurseries lately and seen some customers still buying pansies, snapdragons and other spring blooming plants. The hot weather will ruin these plants very quickly.

Decide on the area to be planted, visit the nursery to see what is available, check flower catalogues, the internet, plant books, neighbors' yards, drive around town for ideas. Notice how others have mixed colors, sizes, etc. Annuals are a good way to experiment, they are relatively easy and inexpensive to replace. Remember there are no mistakes in gardening, just "learning experiences".

Prepare your soil. You should add compost or soil amendment to your planting area and a starter or slow release fertilizer. Success with annuals begins with the soil. If your soil is compacted it would probably be a good idea to rototill it or at least turn it with a soil fork, then add your amendments and mix it in. It is best to prepare your soil before you buy plants, your plants won't have to wait for the preparation after you bring them home.

Have fun choosing your plants. Give yourself plenty of time to shop, look around and enjoy your nursery visit. You may even find plants that are new to you. Check the tags carefully for the plant's needs. Choose plants with few if any flowers, maybe just enough to be assured of the color you are buying. For longer performance, look for smaller plants that have not yet formed flower buds. This allows the plant to adapt to your garden conditions before expending energy on flowers. I

At this time of year, wait until late in the day, along toward evening before planting annuals. They seem to adapt better if planted when it's cooler and then given the cool night to enjoy before the shock of the daytime sun. Separate the plant roots by pinching or cutting through the bottom of the plant. After covering with soil, tamp the plants in securely, and water. Cover with humus or bark to prevent weed growth and retain the soil moisture. It's important to keep the soil moist while the roots are establishing.

Some of the easiest annuals to grow are impatiens, marigolds, black-eyed Susan's, globe amaranth, larkspur, nasturtiums, salvia, sweet alyssum, and vincas. Of course, don't forget petunias. An old favorite, zinnia, has a couple of new varieties called the profusion and the star zinnias, both have mounding habits and are prolific and easy to grow. One new plant is the summer snapdragon, "Angelonia Augustifloria"; it blooms all summer and comes in several new pink, lavender and purple colors. Definitely worth a try!

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