Annual and Perennial Flowers for Year Round Color

by Carolyn Carpino, UC Master Gardener

This time of year presents a challenge to those of us in love with flower color. It's time to plant cool season annuals so they can provide cheery color until late spring. But the summer annuals planted last April often still look great. What to do? Focus your flower planting efforts on key areas of your garden that will draw your attention in upcoming months, and leave the rest alone.

A planting of winter annuals by the mailbox or entryway or visible from your kitchen window will add spark to your winter landscape. Annuals will make the biggest impact if you cluster a bunch of them close together. You'll get more bang for your buck if you plant a whole flat in one corner than you will scattering them like single soldiers across the entire front bed.

If you are looking for flower color that only has to be planted once then consider planting perennials. If you choose well, there are many perennials that bloom almost as long as annuals, are untroubled by pests and diseases, and add fresh flower forms and substance to your garden.

So what do you plant now? Don't plant the summer annuals still displayed alluringly at the garden center. That includes vinca, impatiens, marigolds, etc. Do choose pansies for a non-stop display right into summer. Pansies need to have spent flowers clipped off for best bloom. If that's too much trouble, plant violas or johnny-jump-up. As a bonus, they can last year-round in shady areas and self-seed to provide free plants. Don't plant either where you had vinca this summer or they could be killed by a soil born fungus unless you drench soil with a fungicide.

Other good choices are snapdragons, Iceland poppies, linaria, and stock. These will all come into bloom depending on how early they were planted and how cool the winter weather is. They could bloom through the winter or burst into heavy bloom as the weather warms.

Here are a few favorite perennials that have stood the test of my own Visalia garden for several years. If you're looking for a short perennial that blooms almost year round, consider Scabiosa 'Butterfly Blue'. It grows only a foot tall, has round flowers that resemble a pincushion and are very attractive to butterflies.

A hot colored perennial that could also replace annuals in flower production is Gaillardia 'Goblin'. Daisy-like flowers with a red center and red petals tipped in yellow provide a near year-round show on this compact foot-tall plant.

A slightly taller plant at 18 inches is Achillea 'Moonshine' which has silver foliage and pale yellow flat-topped flowers. Another good achillea is 'Coronation Gold', which grows to 3' and has bright yellow flowers. Achillea millefoliums are also good bloomers but they need staking and can spread a little too freely. ! Echinacea or coneflower grows to 3 feet with pink or white daisy-like flowers. Any of the penstemons are lovely long blooming perennials in Valley gardens. They also may need staking and do best with less water. The hummingbirds will love you if you plant them!

There are a few spectacular perennials that are treated as winter annuals and planted from 6-packs. Delphiniums, the darling of English gardens, are planted in rich, moist soil and staked to support stunning 3-foot spikes in shades of blue and white. 'Magic Fountains' is an excellent variety that yields lovely flowers for cutting and drying. 'Foxy' foxgloves form spikes of flowers in shades of rose and white. They need a partly shady location and must be staked, also. Canterbury bells produce spikes of bell- shaped flowers in shades of blue, pink, and white. Each of these perennials will grow through the cool months and bloom in February to April, depending on the weather.For a shady area, plant primroses and cyclamen to add lovely winter color.

Have you had trouble getting your flowers to grow and thrive? If you usually poke a hole in the ground and stuff the plants in, that could be your problem. For your plants to root well and bloom vigorously, the compacted soil needs to be loosened and amended. First remove the mulch. Dig up the entire area and break up any big clods. Add a few inches of compost or other soil amendment and a handful of bloom fertilizer and mix well. Plant your transplant just a bit high in the soil so they don't suffer from root rot and replace your mulch. To lessen transplant shock, plant in the evening or on a cloud day and water in with half-strength fertilizer.

As you pick a bouquet of colorful flowers to grace your Christmas table, you'll be glad you thought ahead this fall!

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