Master Gardener Newspaper Articles

Volunteer Program

Tulare/Kings Counties

Big Flower Beds Not Necessarily Expensive!

by Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener Advisor

With spring around the corner it's hard to resist sprucing up the yard with flowers. Though it's easy to head to the nursery and purchase six packs, let me remind you that it is also easy to start flower gardens from seed and if you have a large area to transform into garden splendor, then seeds will help cut down on expense.
Annuals are extremely quick to grow from seed and many are spectacular as cut flowers. In a single growing season, they germinate, grow to full size, burst into bloom, and eventually set seed. Bold and bright or subtle and mute, annuals grow to be clumps, spreaders, fillers, or creepers and fit into every garden style. Here are a few tips and ideas.

Getting Started
Spring and summer annuals need warm soil and air temperatures to germinate with vigor and thrive. Sowing directly in the ground is usually done in March or April. It helps to wait until the soil is warm because if the seedling emerge too early and become chilled, their growth comes to a screeching halt or they could be killed.

Since annuals grow more rapidly than most other plants, they perform best in rich soil. Preparing planting beds several days in advance allows all the amended ingredients like compost, leaf mold, sphagnum moss, humus, and fertilizers to settle and blend. First work in a generous layer of organic matter, then add several handfuls of a complete granular fertilizer like 10-10-10 or 16-16-16. This preplant fertilizer should provide enough nutrients for the first half of the growing season; supplemental applications should be timed just after blooming begins. Use a mini-tiller or spading fork to lift and mix the additions with the natural soil. Blend as well as possible, lightly pack, and rake to contour.

The area can be any shape or height, just make sure that water penetrates and infiltrates, rather than runs off. Scatter seeds uniformly and then gently rake to cover the seeds with soil or apply a thin layer of "topper" or compost. Set the nozzle tip to sprinkle with a fine mist so that seeds are not washed away. Eventually you can increase the pressure and droplet size. Keep the soil moist for 7-14 days or until little seedlings appear.

What to sow?
Alyssum is a low growing plant covered in small white blossoms with a sweet honey fragrance that soften edges and cascades gently over walls or along the ground. Candytuft is similar, but its shape is a more defined mound and foliage is a darker green. Blue flowered lobelia makes a striking border plant because it stays low and keeps its shape and brilliant blue flowers for a long time.

Tall climbing vines that quickly cover a chain link fence or arbor are annual morning glory and moonflower. Heart shaped leaves are soon luxuriously cloaked with white, red, or blue funnel shaped flowers that keep going and going and going. At the beginning of fall cut the stems at the base and pull them off the structure for an easier clean-up solution.

Cosmos is becoming more familiar in nurseries. Bright cheery blossoms are 3-4 inches wide with tufted yellow centers and rays in pink to purple shades borne on tall feathery stalks. This annual is available in short to tall heights.

Tithonia is the Mexican sunflower that is a slightly coarse plant with velvety green leaves and bright orange daisy like flowers. It thrives in our summer heat and reaches 4-5 feet tall in a season. Prefers soil a little less rich than most annuals.

Love-lies-bleeding is an amaranth that is a sturdy, branching plant reaching 3-8 feet in height with leaves 2-10 inches long. Tiny red flowers in drooping, tassel-like clusters add a big showy curiosity to the garden.

Baby's breath can fill out any garden bed with its puffy form and enhances the shape of many other plants. It forms a bushy plant with fine foliage that is covered by small, white or light pink blooms throughout summer. An attractive contrast to coarser textured broad-leaved flowers like pansies, nasturtium, and delphiniums, yet also works with lacier plants like yarrow. Baby's breath is a favorite companion with roses and other cut flowers in vases.

Marigolds, nasturtiums, poppies, runner beans, sunflowers, and zinnias are so familiar that a description is not needed but now available are new shades and flower forms besides the traditional. Don't forget that herbs such as basil, chives, cilantro, dill, lavender, marjoram, oregano, parsley, rosemary and thymes all can be started from seed (though not all are annuals). Several varieties of these selected annuals are packaged by Renee's Garden Seeds, Lilly Miller, Ferry Morse, and Burpee and are commonly found on local store shelves.

March 16, 2006