Master Gardener Newspaper Articles

Volunteer Program

Tulare/Kings Counties

# Time to Plan Your Flower Beds

by Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener Advisor

Bedding plants are usually annuals massed in landscape beds for brilliant color displays. In our area an avid gardener can change their color 3 times a year and have beautiful lush color for spring, summer and winter. If that's too much for you, then narrow it down. Even one effort at color is better than none. Planting spring annual favorites now will probably only last through May. Planting the real heat lovers in April will take you through September. Planting in October will take you through April.
Adding annuals, perennials, vines, and bulbs to your existing foundation shrubs can lead to a year round color display. If you want your flower beds to be beautiful and less work, then spend an hour in your garden before you go to the nursery.

Choose sites carefully. Stroll around your property and decide where you want to devote time, money, and energy into creating more visual appeal. Choose sites that are seen from within the house or that enhance a visitor's approach to your front and back doors. Are the areas in full or partial sun or complete shade? Determine how to water them: established sprinklers, portable sprinklers, soaker hoses or drip systems. Estimate size of these spaces.

Large beds need more careful planning than do smaller areas or container pots. Magazines and garden books on display now will illustrate and suggest species and varieties to plant. You can follow a cook book recipe or you can create your own palette. To create harmony carry a theme around your whole property, rather than changing themes abruptly. Tie beds together with either color or repetition. Make allowance for plant height and proper spacing. If you have huge areas, then put the plan on paper and color it in to get a general idea of the overall effect. You don't even need to choose the plants yet, just know how tall and what color.

Avoid planting in straight lines. Sketch out the design of the bed and clump plants together rather than lining them up in straight rows. Use hoses or rope to get a visual idea. Use staggered rows or trace curves in different directions. Waves, semi-circles or groups of odd numbers of plants are more visually appealing than straight lines.

Add height. Be sure to include plants of differing sizes in your bedding layout. Of course, the amount of height and variety of plants really depends on the size and shape of the bed and if the bed stands alone or is up against a fence. Taller accent plants provide a vertical dimension to bedding displays. Place them down the center of the bed or toward the back of a border. Another way to add height is to accent the bed with climbers growing up a trellis for support. Smaller plants should be in front and you need to decide if you want a single species to outline the bed/border or if the outline needs to be broken up intermittently.

Play with color and foliage combinations. Flower beds can be tones of the same color, three complimentary colors, or they can be a mix and match of many colors. All are successful if properly orchestrated. Take the architecture and color of your house into account when designing so that both work in harmony.

Use soft colored foliage plants such as dusty miller or yarrow to offset brightly colored varieties as coleus or scarlet sage. White flowered varieties, such as white begonias, impatiens, petunias, geraniums, zinnias, etc. also help tremendously to blend, lighten, and tone down excesses of strong, bright colors. Sometimes a solid mass of color is what is needed to guide visitors to the front door or garden gate. Once inside a big variety of color in the back yard will lift the spirits and enliven the mood.

Purchasing plants and supplies. At the nursery choose the plants that will form the foundation, the color bursts, the textures, the diversity, and the unifying elements to your beds. Pick and purchase plants not yet in full bloom. Look for bright or dark green foliage on short branching stems and slightly moist soil. Arrange your choices on your cart and make sure that you are satisfied with how they blend together. Envision them in your yard. Change out the ones that just don't seem to match. Don't forget to purchase compost, soil amendments, a mild fertilizer like triple sixteen, and organic mulch for the top layer.

At home, keep arranging the potted plants in the bed until you are satisfied with their placement. Then plant, water thoroughly, and nurture them through bloom.

March 9, 2006