Winter Color Planting Time is Here

by Carolyn Carpino, UC Master Gardener

This time of year presents a challenge to those of us in love with annual 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 annual 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.

Don't wait too long to make the switch. Annuals need to be planted by mid October to get established before the cool weather arrives. Planting can be done later, but often the plants will just sulk until warm weather arrives.

Have you had trouble getting your annuals 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.

Prepare planting areas so they have excellent drainage. One way to improve drainage is to add soil amendments such as peat moss, fir bark or well-decomposed compost. Avoid green compost, as this actually will encourage damping off diseases. Add as much amendment as you can afford and strive for a 50-50 blend of amendment and soil. Mix well.

Another way to improve drainage is to plant in raised beds. Adding 4-12" of height to a bed allows water to drain away from roots and prevents roots from being waterlogged. If you can't raise the beds, then plant the transplants high so that water drains away from the crown of the plant. To lessen transplant shock, plant in the evening or on a cloudy day and water in with half-strength liquid fertilizer
If you continually plant flowers in the same bed year after year, then it becomes more important each season to prepare the bed for planting. Damping off fungi attack most bedding plants, so the fungal population tends to build up over time. Be sure to chop and rototill old plants into the bed and let the bed sit idle for a few weeks before amending soil and planting again.

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, then 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.

There are a few spectacular perennials that are treated as winter annuals here 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. Both of these plants may make it through the summer in a sheltered location to become provide even more flowers next winter.

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

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