
PETUNIAS

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Adapted from *Petunia*, by Nancy Garrison, Farm Advisor, University of California Cooperative Extension, Santa Clara County.

Petunias may be the most popular annual flower in the United States...little wonder, since they have so many positive attributes, including:

- = Easy culture
- = Fast growth
- = Long flowering season

It is not unusual for petunias to grow from seeding to bloom in only seven to eight weeks.

Petunias belong to the plant family *Solanaceae*, which includes potato, tomato, eggplant, tobacco, *Datura*, *Browallia*, *Brunfelsia*, *Nierembergia*, and many more. In the mid-19th century petunias were introduced to the European horticultural community after their discovery in Argentina.

Breeding of petunias began about 30 years after the plant's discovery. One of the early hybridizers was a Californian, Theodosia Burr Shepherd, who produced petunias with huge flowers. They were given the name Giants of California.

This type of petunia is not often seen today, but seeds are still obtainable from a few specialty seed companies. 'Can Can' and 'Dwarf Ruffled Giants of

California' are two varieties of this large-flowered type.

The extensive range of modern hybrids is derived from just a few petunia species native to South America.

TYPES

The many varieties available today are commonly divided into two main types:

- = Hybrid **grandiflora** — large flowered
- = Hybrid **multiflora** — many flowered

Each of these types can further be divided into **single flowered** (*the minimum number of petals for its kind — in the case of petunia it is five petals, although fused into a tunnel shape*), and **double flowered** (*an indefinite number of petals, usually many, which produces a flower that is unusually full in appearance*).

In addition, these two main types can be divided into **solid colors, bicolors** (*a colored flower with a white star, formed by white petal stripes joining at the center of the flower*), and **picotees** (*the flower is edged or bordered with white*).

Finally, some varieties feature fringed or ruffled petal edges instead of the usual smooth-edged flower.



USES

Petunias can be mass planted in borders and beds, added to patio containers, hanging baskets and window boxes — the single flowered varieties make good cut flowers.

CULTURE

A sunny garden location is preferred, but petunias will also do well in partial shade. If the shade is too dense, flower production may be sparse.

Any well-drained garden soil will produce nice petunias if the soil is kept moderately moist. Single flowered types tolerate alkalinity, but will grow in poor soil if it's well drained. Space plants about one foot apart. Fertilize the plants monthly for better growth and more flowers.

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Pinch the tips of branchlets when the plants are about six inches tall. This procedure will delay flowering of young plants a week or two, but will force denser and more compact growth. After a period of flowering, when plants begin to look "leggy," pinch back or prune again to reinvigorate.

STARTING FROM SEED

If plants of favorite cultivars are not available at nurseries and garden centers, or if you would like to propagate your own plants, the following are some considerations.

Sow seeds in containers in spring when temperatures are beginning to warm up. Seeds are tiny and require light for good germination, so do not cover them with soil. **Never** allow the surface to dry out. Check the soil surface often and mist as necessary. A cover of glass or plastic over the container may be helpful to bring the humidity up.

Transplant to recycled, nursery plant-packs or similar containers as soon as the seedlings are large enough to handle. Seedlings are tiny — a pair of tweezers can be gently wielded to perform the transplanting operation if clumsiness is a concern.

Generally, the younger seedlings are when transplanted, the less the transplant *shock* will be. Transplant *shock* can be reduced by careful monitoring of irrigation and humidity needs.

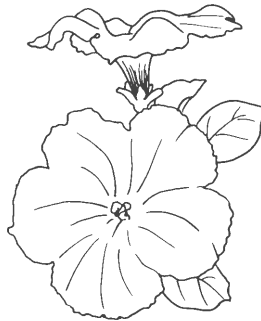
When seedlings are well established and beginning to crowd each other a bit in their plant-packs (*three to four weeks after transplanting*), plant them out in their permanent locations.

PROBLEMS

Petunias, like most other popular summer bedding plants, are usually free of pests and diseases. Occasionally, however, there can be problems.

Slugs and snails can devour young transplants but can be controlled with bait or hand-picking at night.

Tobacco budworms destroy young buds and flowers. If this insect becomes a problem, *BT* (*bacillus thuringiensis*) and other insecticides are available for control. Early detection is very important.



WARNING ON THE USE OF CHEMICALS

Pesticides are poisonous. Always read and carefully follow all precautions and safety recommendations given on the container label. Store all chemicals in the original labeled containers in a locked cabinet or shed, away from food or feeds, and out of the reach of children, unauthorized persons, pets, and livestock.

Confine chemicals to the property being treated. Avoid drift onto neighboring properties, especially gardens containing fruits and/or vegetables ready to be picked.

Dispose of empty containers carefully. Follow label instructions for disposal. Never reuse containers. Make sure empty containers are not accessible to children or animals. Never dispose of containers where they may contaminate water supplies or natural waterways. Do not pour down sink or toilet. Consult your county agricultural commissioner for correct ways of disposing of excess pesticides. Never burn pesticide containers.