
GARDEN TOPICS

Commonly Used Annuals

Annuals are essential to any summer garden where color is important. The term "annual" refers to a plant that completes its life cycle in one season, but in the gardening world, annual also refers to plants that are grown for just one season. Most often, annuals are valued for the color they bring to the garden, either through blooms or foliage. This information sheet provides basic information about many of the annuals that are commonly used in our region. For information about lesser known annuals that are also excellent garden choices, access the information sheet entitled *Underused Annuals*. Popular plants, such as impatiens, geraniums, begonias, coleus, petunias and zinnias, have individual information sheets.

All of the annuals listed below can be started from seed but unless you have lots of room and lights to get them going early, it's better to buy them at Whiting's garden centers. These plants are ready to be planted as soon as the weather is warm enough .

Ageratum is also called floss flower. Most varieties are short, compact plants that bear dense heads of fuzzy blue, rose or white flowers. There are also a few varieties (such as 'Blue Horizon') that grow much taller and are excellent cut flowers. Ageratum grows best in full sun and well-drained soil. This annual will tolerate light shade. To encourage better blooming, deadhead ageratum when the flowers pass their prime. The plant does not do well in cool air and soil temperatures so wait until late May to plant them outside.

Alyssum

This is a great low-growing annual for borders and containers. Popularly known as sweet alyssum, it forms

clusters of tiny, sweetly fragrant flowers on plants with very fine foliage. Sweet alyssum is most commonly available in white, purple and rose. Watch for a new peach-colored variety, too. Alyssum does best during the cool parts of the season. Plant where it will get lots of strong light but be shaded from the heat of the afternoon sun. It prefers well-drained soil and requires frequent fertilization to keep blooming. If the plant gets floppy, shear it back.

Begonia

The type of begonia most often used as a bedding plant is the fibrous or wax-leaf begonia. It is valued as a low-maintenance, heat-tolerant plant that provides color both from its flowers and its foliage. Depending on the variety, begonia leaves are either bronze or green and always very glossy. The flowers are usually red, rose or white. Varieties with bronze leaves are more sun tolerant than green-leave varieties. Plant in well-drained soil. Tuberous begonias have much larger, slightly hairy leaves and big, bold flowers. They grow from a bulb/tuber; require shade in the afternoon, frequent feeding and well-drained soil.

Celosia

These plants can be divided into two groups: those with fine, feathery flowers called plumes and those that have ruffled, crested flowers called cockscombs. There are

varieties that are short and used for bedding and others that are tall and used for cutting. All celosias need full sun to do their best and prefer rich, well-drained soil. Celosia blooms are usually bold colors, such as red, orange and yellow. An unusual new

variety called 'Flamingo Feather' offers a more open plant with softer lavender-pink blooms. Celosia flowers are valued because they hold their color and form for weeks before fading.

Coleus

This annual is prized for its colored foliage and its ability to grow well in the shade. There are some new types of coleus that are vegetatively propagated called Sun Coleus. Coleus will grow in almost any soil type and does well in our climate in any situation with bright light. The leaves are usually a combination of colors, mostly shades of red, green, silver and orange.

Dusty Miller

This plant provides soft gray, almost white leaves that help show off other plants. In addition to those with bold, white leaves, look for the fine, feathery varieties that offer a more subtle contrast. Dusty miller does its best in full sun but will tolerate light shade. Most varieties grow 8-12 inches tall.

Dianthus

Annual dianthus are the cold-tolerant cousins of carnations and pinks. The flowers can be single or double and the delicate petals are often fringed. They tend to be at their peak early in the season and fade as the summer gets hot, just like pansies. Annual dianthus can be pink, white, pale purple or rosy red. They are slightly fragrant. Grow dianthus in well-drained soil where they will get lots of strong light.

Impatiens

These are the queens of all the shade annuals. They don't require any direct sun and will bloom wherever there is strong light. Impatiens are also valued for their wide color range and ability to bloom consistently throughout the season. Fertilize regularly and pinch them back if they get too tall or leggy. There are several types of impatiens offered in garden centers. Look carefully at the tags to make sure you are getting the size you want as well as the color. Watch for new types of double impatiens, such as the Fiesta series as well as the new African impatiens and the miniature firefly impatiens.

Lobelia

These plants are best known for their masses of intensely blue, delicate flowers, but there are also rose and white varieties available, too. Like pansies and dianthus, lobelias like the cool part of the season. Plant them where they will get full sun in spring and some shade as the trees leaf out and the summer heats up. You can enjoy trailing or cascading varieties as well as the upright, mound-forming ones.

Moss Roses

Known by their botanical name *Portulaca*, moss roses are true sun lovers. They are low-growing plants, almost forming a mat. The flowers are fairly large and offer many bold colors. Plant them where they will have full sun and well-drained soil.

Petunia

Here is an old-fashioned annual that continues to be popular and has been rejuvenated with new varieties. Petunias offer large flowers and lots of colors. They do their best in full sun but will tolerate light shade (but will bloom a little less). They need well-drained

soil and should be fertilized regularly. New varieties such as the Wave

petunias need to be fertilized constantly to remain in full bloom.

Salvia

There are several types of salvia used as annuals in our climate. The standard garden sage, *Salvia splendens*, offers large flowers in bold colors, typically red or purple. For a good blue, we also grow *Salvia farinacea*. Occasionally you will see *Salvia coccinea* offered, too. It is a taller, more open plant that has more delicate blooms in pink, red or white. All salvia does best in full sun but the garden sage will also tolerate light shade. When selecting salvia for the garden, be sure to check the tags for information on plant height. Salvias should be deadheaded and fertilized regularly to keep them blooming.

Verbena

Verbena is another annual that has undergone great changes in recent years. New varieties are much easier to grow and more resistant to powdery mildew. Verbena has tight clusters of small flowers and comes in a wide range of colors. Some varieties are trailing, others are mound forming. Verbenas do best in full sun.

Vinca

An annual that is incredible when we have a hot, sunny summer and struggles when we don't. It offers large flowers in white, pink, pale purple and rosy-red. Plant it in full sun and well-drained soil.

Zinnias

Available in a wide variety of plant heights and colors. All the flowers are daisy-like, but they can be singles, doubles, cactus or other forms. Colors tend towards orange, red, yellow and pink. Flower size may range from less than an inch to 4 or 5 inches across. Zinnias prefer full sun and well-drained soil. Look for the new Profusion zinnias and the thread-leaf varieties that are very disease resistant.