

ANNUALS FOR WINTER

Now is the time to plant flowering annuals for splashes of winter colour. Here's how to turn your garden into a colourful showpiece, with a selection of popular blooms

PHOTO GAP

Flowering annuals are a godsend for a gardener like me, who is besotted by blooms. I try to fill every centimetre of my garden with as much colour as possible.

Since I don't want to become a total garden slave, the majority of my garden is devoted to perennials, but I also plant annual seedlings and sow seed twice a year to add bright colour and a profusion of flowers throughout the year.

Annuals bloom intensely during their short lives, and they're bred for flower or colour variation and disease resistance. They fulfil their life cycle in less than a year from seed to flowering plant, with varieties for shade and sun positions.

Planting time is critical, as the selected plants need to reach maturity when the weather is most suitable. Now the heat of summer is over, it's time to plant annual varieties to provide colour through late winter and early spring. However you can also plant cold-sensitive varieties in spring to provide summer colour, or plant in summer for an autumn display.

Warm-weather and tropical gardeners can have annual flowers year-round, though seedlings need daily watering in mid-summer to survive the harsh sun.

Traditionally, annuals were planted in separate garden beds. I tend to plant annuals into any vacant garden space in established beds and, since most forms are small, they are good for edgings or borders, containers, colour accents and mass planting; many varieties are indispensable in cutting gardens, too. ▶

best annuals for shade

- 1 **Lobelia** Small blue or white flowers; some forms are trailing. ↑ 10–16cm ↔ 18cm 🌱
- 2 **Primula and polyanthus** Single flowers in all colours of the rainbow. Primula flowers are held above the foliage on tall stalks. ↑ 13–30cm ↔ 13–20cm, 🌱 🌿
- 3 **Coleus** Grown for its multicoloured foliage. ↑ 20–25cm ↔ 20cm 🌱
- 4 **Foxglove** Biennial grown as an annual with spires of white or pink tubular flowers. ↑ 45–90cm ↔ 35cm 🌱 🌿

- 5 **Pansy and viola** Flowers mostly in shades of yellow and purple. ↑ 10–15cm ↔ 15cm 🌱
- 6 **Bedding begonia** Prolific pink, red or white single or double flowers; burgundy or green leaves. ↑ 15–30cm ↔ 15–30cm 🌱
- 7 **Honesty** Purple flowers and papery seed cases. ↑ 90cm ↔ 30cm 🌱 🌿
- 8 **Cineraria** Daisy-like massed flowers in shades of white and purple. ↑ 60cm ↔ 60cm 🌱 🌿



lobelia



polyanthus



pansy



honesty



foxglove

best annuals for sun

- 1 **Alyssum** Frothy, dainty white flowers. ↑ 10cm ↔ 30cm 🌱
- 2 **Corn cockle** Pink or white single flowers ↑ 80cm ↔ 40cm 🌱 🌿
- 3 **Hollyhock** Single and double flowers on tall stems. ↑ 2m–3m ↔ 50cm 🌱
- 4 **Sweet pea** Richly scented flowers in rainbow colours. Groundcover and climbing forms. ↑ 30cm–2m ↔ 20cm 🌱 🌿
- 5 **Queen Anne's lace** Tall stems, umbels of tiny white flowers. ↑ 1.5m ↔ 50cm 🌱 🌿

- 6 **Flanders poppy** Traditional red flowers; the symbol of Anzac Day and Remembrance Day. ↑ 60cm ↔ 40cm 🌱 🌿
- 7 **Cosmos** Pink, mauve or white, mostly single flowers on tall stems. ↑ 1.2m ↔ 30cm 🌱 🌿
- 8 **Petunia** Single or double flowers in every shade of the rainbow. ↑ 20cm ↔ 15cm 🌱
- 9 **Marigold** Bright orange flowers. ↑ 20–90cm ↔ 20–50cm 🌱 🌿
- 10 **Paper daisy** Pink or white papery flowers. ↑ 50cm ↔ 25cm 🌱 🌿



Flanders poppy



marigold



corn cockle



hollyhock

KEY ↑ height ↔ width 🌱 grow from seed planted directly in garden 🌿 good for pots 🌿 good for cutting

How you use annuals is a matter of personal taste. You can create harmony by blending similar colours, or fashion a show-stopping design using contrasting shades. For a bright contemporary look, team sizzling orange marigolds with deep purple petunias, or create a sophisticated cottage garden effect by mixing the tall, stately blooms of pink cosmos with delicate Queen Anne's lace.

Most annuals' short but merry life makes them ideal for temporary gardens and, if you have the space, they will look especially good when used in drifts. Create a natural look by distributing them as if seed had been casually sprinkled, rather than planting them in straight lines or rows.

Dramatic annuals, such as stripey petunias and brilliant red salvias, need to be used judiciously, otherwise they can completely dominate a garden design. I like these best in containers, where their 'look-at-me' attitude becomes less strident.

Some short-lived perennials and biennials are also grown as annuals, including foxgloves, hollyhocks, sweet william and varieties that

flower in their first year. One example is salvia 'Victoria Blue' (*Salvia farinacea*), which is sold as an annual but is a short-lived perennial in its native Texas and in warm parts of Australia.

I grow *S. farinacea* in informal drifts among my culinary herbs and leave it to self-seed each year. Seedlings from the original punnets of blue and white plants (there is also a bright red form) have created a continuous floral show for 15 years. The plants in my Perth garden live for about two years if I cut back the foliage when it gets mildew and black spot. Plants eventually lose vigour and are removed when their progeny start flowering.

seed or seedling

While it is cheapest to grow annuals from seed, they take longer to flower and need more initial care. I choose to grow some cottage garden-style plants from seed and buy seedlings of other plants.

Annuals such as alyssum, sunflowers, poppies, sweet peas, zinnias, marigolds, cornflowers, cleome, cosmos, nasturtiums and Queen Anne's

SWEET DREAMS
With its dense clusters of dainty, fragrant white flowers, sweet alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*) is perfect for borders and hanging pots.



PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES

"More costly hybrid forms make up for the extra expense by producing more spectacular flowers"

lace are so easy to grow from seed that I prefer to sow them directly where they are to grow. As for more temperamental varieties, I generally just buy inexpensive punnets of seedlings. You'll find a wide range available, including slightly more costly hybrid forms that make up for the extra expense by producing more spectacular flowers.

I prefer to buy pansies and violas, lobelia, begonia, verbena and petunias this way. In warmer months, some seedlings are also available as 'potted colour', which are fully grown and already in flower, and these make an instant impact.

planting tips

Annuals need excellent, freely draining soil. Improve by adding aged organic matter, such as compost or old manures, before planting. Add clay to sandy soils; heavy clay may need the addition of a clay breaker

and complete fertiliser. Most annuals prefer a neutral or slightly acid soil (pH of about 6) but plants such as sweet pea, dianthus and gypsophila prefer more alkaline, so add some lime if needed.

Either sprinkle the seed in shallow rows or broadcast drifts, depending on the design. Cover seed very lightly with a little more soil – I generally just lightly rake some soil over the seed but, if you are more diligent, you can sift some fine soil over instead – then water using a watering can with a fine rose or hose attachment.

When annuals develop their first pair of true leaves, thin them to the recommended spacing, using the information on the seed packet, since crowded plants will struggle to develop a good root system. Provide your annuals with regular liquid fertiliser during the growing season, and prolong flowering by removing spent blooms. GA