

what to plant now for WINTER WOW!

On your marks, get set, go... It's time to get your annuals in the ground for a splash of colour when the weather cools. DERYN THORPE shows you how

There is nothing quite as uplifting as a cheery display of flowering annuals when the sky is grey in winter.

I plant elegant pastel schemes to emulate coolness in summer, and then sizzling displays of red, orange and purple flowers to dazzle when the temperature starts to drop.

Annuals are loved by gardeners because they're the quickest and least expensive way to add flowers to the garden. They bloom intensely during their short lives and many varieties look fabulous in pots. Annuals fulfil their life cycle in less than a year, from seed to flower, though many that are sold as annuals, including begonia, snapdragon and salvia, are short-lived perennials.

If you haven't already planted winter annuals, hop to it now or you'll run out of time to get them established before the weather cools. They thrive in all areas of Australia over winter, including subtropical climates, but you need to provide protection from heavy frosts.

If you don't live in warmer parts of Australia, or don't have a warm, protected seed-raising area, it's getting a bit late

to start annuals from seed, unless you are prepared for them to flower mid to late winter. However, it's the perfect time to choose your favourite seedlings. Look for varieties sold as potted colour or six packs that are already in flower.

getting started

Most annuals have a short but merry life so you can give your garden a new look each season. There are no 'rules' when choosing plants, but gardens look harmonious with balance. I try to juggle vibrant contrasting colours with the continuity of a one-hued palette.

Upright plants, such as snapdragons, look good at the back of beds and create a vertical accent in pots. Groundcover forms of lobelia and alyssum add a romantic touch if left to spill from pots and baskets. Energise the garden with a mix of vivacious orange marigolds and deep blue cornflowers, or team stately red snapdragons with black violas.

Mass plantings are the best way to create a show-stopping display. For the greatest impact, use one variety in a single colour, or no more than two complementary colours. ▶

"Energise the garden with vivacious orange marigolds and blue cornflowers"



“Mass plantings are the best way to create a show-stopping display”

One or two plants seem to disappear in a planting scheme but drifts add impact and move the eye through the garden, directing the gaze to features such as benches and artwork.

My favourite annuals to mass-plant are seedling begonias, which need semi-shade in summer but dazzle in the winter sun. The varieties with bronze leaves and red flowers look particularly spectacular, but you can also get forms that have pink and white flowers and green foliage.

Pansies and violas are small and make great edging plants for garden beds and pathways. In my experience, the more expensive ‘premium’ varieties outperform unbranded plants as they have superior branching and flower production.

Annuals are perfect for pots. I usually tuck them into unobtrusive places in the garden beds while they establish, then move them to more visible areas, such as the entertaining patio or beside the front door, when they are in flower.

planting seedlings

When you’re buying seedlings, look for plants that are stocky rather than lanky. Turn the punnet to check the roots. One or two roots coming out of the hole at

the bottom of the cell is okay but if the entire cell is full, the seedlings are root bound and will establish more slowly. Once you get home, put your seedlings into a bucket with a weak solution of liquid seaweed for a few hours, to stimulate root growth and help the plants deal with transplant shock.

Seedlings need moist free-draining soil. Add compost or old manure, and to sandy soil, also add clay, and work it until it’s loose and friable. Check on the packet how close seedlings should be spaced. Dig holes about twice the size of the pot or punnet and position so the top of the root ball is the same height as the garden bed soil. Firm the soil gently with your hands, then water well and tip on the liquid seaweed they soaked in. It’s the same process for pots, which should be filled with premium potting mix.

sowing seeds

Some of the winter-flowering annuals are particularly easy to grow from seed (see ‘winter winners’, right). I’m too lazy to start these in pots and usually just sow them where they are to grow. Sprinkle seed randomly into damp soil, rather than in lines, then rake a little



winter winners

key ↑ height ↔ width ☀ sun ☁ semi-shade ☾ shade * easy from seed
Plants listed suit all areas of Australia except the tropics. T = also suitable for the tropics.

- **Lobelia*** Small blue or white flowers, trailing forms. ↑ 15cm ↔ 20cm ☀ ☁ T
- **Primula and polyanthus*** Single flowers in all the colours of the rainbow. Primula flowers are held above the foliage on tall stalks. ↑ 13–30cm ↔ 13–20cm ☀ ☁ ☾
- **Foxglove*** A biennial grown as an annual, with spires of white or pink tubular flowers. ↑ 45–90cm, ↔ 35cm ☀ ☁
- **Pansy and viola** Flowers in shades of yellow, red, orange and purple. ↑ 10–15cm ↔ 15cm ☀ ☁ T
- **Bedding begonia** Prolific pink, red or white single or double flowers. ↑ 15–30cm ↔ 15–30cm ☀ ☁ ☾ T
- **Honesty*** Purple flowers followed by papery seed cases. ↑ 90cm ↔ 30cm ☀ ☁
- **Cineraria** Daisy-like massed flowers in white and purple. ↑ 30–60cm ↔ 40–60cm ☾ T
- **Sweet pea*** Perfumed flowers in rainbow colours. Climbing and dwarf forms. ↑ 30cm–2m ↔ 20cm ☀ ☁
- **Marigold*** Bright orange flowers. ↑ 20–90cm ↔ 20–50cm ☀ T
- **Alyssum*** Frothy white or mauve flowers. ↑ 10cm ↔ 30cm ☀ ☁ T
- **Paper daisy*** Pink or white papery flowers. ↑ 50cm ↔ 25cm ☀ T
- **Calendula*** Yellow or orange daisy heads. ↑ 40–60cm ↔ 30cm ☀ ☁ T
- **Nemesia*** Small, two-lipped flowers, in rainbow colours. ↑ 25cm ↔ 20cm ☀ ☁ T
- **Forget-me-not*** Small blue flowers, trailing habit. ↑ 40cm ↔ 30cm ☀ ☁
- **Ageratum** Fluffy, lavender or blue flowers. ↑ 15–60cm ↔ 20–30cm ☀ ☁ T
- **Cornflower** Double flowers in blue, pink or white. ↑ 60–75cm ↔ 30cm ☀ ☁
- **Nasturtium*** Autumn-toned flowers, bushy or scrambling forms, circular leaves ↑ 40cm ↔ 40cm–1m ☀ ☁ T
- **Nigella (love-in-a-mist)*** Blue or white flowers and decorative seed heads. ↑ 40cm ↔ 20cm ☀ ☁ T
- **Snapdragon*** Tubular, rainbow-coloured flowers that look like dragons. ↑ 30–90cm ↔ 15–30cm ☀ ☁ T

BLOOMING TERRIFIC
Clockwise from far left Create a cheerful, meadow-inspired display in containers filled with alyssum, lobelia and petunia, in yellow, white and blue; sweet pea; forget-me-not; foxglove; nasturtium; cineraria. Below calendula.



soil to cover them. Big seeds, such as nasturtium and sweet pea, are planted in individual holes about 2cm deep.

care & maintenance

Keep your seeds and tiny seedlings moist, as sprouted seeds die if they dry out. Use a water mist from a spray bottle so you don’t disturb the soil. Check plants during dry spells as the feeding roots of annuals are close to the soil surface and plants deteriorate quickly if they are allowed to completely dry out.

Feed with a sprinkle of fertiliser, and boost the growth and flower production by using liquid fertiliser all over the foliage and root zone every two weeks.

If you thin out seedlings when they are a few centimetres tall, and continue feeding them with liquid fertiliser, they should be flowering by mid to late winter in all but the coldest areas. To prolong flowering throughout the season, deadhead the spent flowers as often as possible.

Snails and slugs love seeds and seedlings. Sprinkle snail pellets, install beer traps, create barriers with wood ash, sawdust or coffee grounds, or use cut plastic bottles, yoghurt containers or toilet paper tubes to protect plants. GA