

COLOR ENHANCEMENT IN THE LANDSCAPE

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The subject of working color into the landscape has become very intensive which, I am sure, everyone is well aware. Home gardeners have been utilizing color in their yards for years. The result has been an average increase of 10 percent a year for the bedding plant industry since the middle sixties. The color wave has now spilled over into the mega-area landscape business. The use of green shrubs and a few ornamental trees is no longer adequate.

Cities, corporations, malls and golf courses have found that color sells, and this spring will probably be a very important pivotal time for most of you, especially if you have not already jumped on the color bandwagon. Many, if not most of you, are aware of the use of annuals in color spots generally around clubhouses, etc. What we are dealing with now is the expansion of this type of use and the extension into major highly visible areas on the fairways. There is really a massive menu of plant material for you to choose from - bulbs, ornamental grasses, wildflowers, and annuals. Do not get caught up in the swirl or idea that all of these plant materials should appear all at once together. The best suggestion I can make is to start with annuals; because, for the most part they are probably the most foolproof.

If this year is a first-time venture for using annuals to work color into landscape settings, do not try and get fancy. Keep all the plans and plantings simple until you have a feel for the plant material. Also, start with a short list of kinds of plants and cultivars. Just doing this can save you a lot of headaches.

The plant material you choose must be the best in bloom production or foliage color, pest resistance, bloom or foliage duration, plus reduced actual plant maintenance and color rendition. The general growth habit (height and width) of the plants along with their environmental requirements must also be known for proper site placement. With many kinds of annuals and hundreds of cultivars to choose from, this can be a very interesting experience. There is, however, information available to you out there on the information superhighway that has been put together in regards to cultivars, their uses and maintenance for the best show possible. Information is as close as your county extension office.

Here in the state of Michigan the information is available through the Spartan Ornamental Network (SON) which is part of CEENET which is tied in at county extension terminals. Another source of information is trial gardens. They usually produce performance reports and other fact sheets. As the Flower Seed Trial Coordinator for the MSU Department of Horticulture Demonstrations Gardens located around the Plant and Soil Sciences Building, this is something I do every year. These gardens are also very helpful, if visited, especially the last of July and the first of August to see large numbers of cultivars in comparison with each other, and decision for use can be made accordingly.

This brings us to another point, in that, your decisions on the cultivars to use may be different than what is generally available in the bedding plant trade. Generally, bedding plant producers use cultivars that stay short and bloom quick for production and shipping requirements. Large landscape areas may need the use of more vigorous and taller growing cultivars that can be enjoyed from a longer distance. You will, therefore, probably find it necessary to contract with a plant producer to grow some of the material especially for you. There are plant producers that are already doing this as a way of expanding their business.

To start with, for summer color, stay with fibrous-rooted begonias and seed produced impatiens for semi-shaded or morning sun areas. I do not recommend any annuals for heavy shaded sites. Leave these areas to ground cover use, hostas, and/or spring bulbs. Use alyssum, dianthus, dusty miller, hypoestes, marigolds, seed pelargoniums, petunias, portulaca, rudbeckia, and vinca for full sun areas. Vinca and portulaca will take the most heat. I also suggest you look at trying some pansies for late summer or early fall planting to replace any items that have become bedraggled in appearance.

The cultivar recommendations, as listed in Table 1, are the result of performance ratings in the MSU flower seed trials over the last three years. Many of the items have a taller stature with a nice growth pattern suited for landscape conditions. By this, I mean plant material that will give a real color splash which can be enjoyed both from a distance, as well as, up close.

In regard to plant maintenance, start with a good loose soil structure, as generally, most of the different kinds of plants are shallow and more fibrous-rooted. The pH should be between 5.5 and 6.5 with a balanced nutrient level. I suggest you have a soil test run every spring. A nutrient addition suggestion is to use a 3 month duration, slow release, complete nutrient mix at 1 pound per 100 square feet. I recommend planting on 8 to 12 inch centers depending on the kind of plant - alyssum, pansies: 8", begonias, dianthus: 10", and marigolds, petunias: 12". Pinch back petunia stem tips at planting time as the plants will branch better and give a much nicer show. Keeping the root cool can make all the difference between an average color show and a beautiful color show. After planting, therefore, mulch around the plants to help control weeds, moisture, and keep the roots cool.

One of the biggest problems, in many instances, is over-use of irrigation systems for such plantings. None of the plants like constant wet feet, and wet foliage during the night will bring on many disease problems. One good watering a week during warm, dry periods done at sunup is all that is needed. If you cannot accomplish this, do not plant annuals and leave the area to grass.

If you have an area that you want a spring bulb show and then follow with an annual planting, you have three options. You can plant early flowering bulb cultivars at a depth of 10 inches and then cultivate shallow in late spring for the annuals. Another option is to plant the bulbs on 12-inch centers and then plant the annuals in the open areas between the bulbs. The third option is to plant clumps of 5 bulbs together leaving tilling and planting space between clumps.

In regard to fall planting of pansies, they can be planted the last week of August through the 15th of September, replacing plant material that has gone over the hill - such as petunias - at this time of the season. I recommend the use of plants that have been grown in a standard flat of 48 plants. This size plant will root in quicker and survive the winter better. After planting, mulch around the plants and not on them. Also, plant pansies only in beds free from standing water and not in wind-swept, very exposed areas. A snow cover is a nice insulation barrier for pansies. Following these suggestions, the pansies will give you a nice fall and spring show.

Now, make a commitment to visit the MSU summer trials this year to get an insight as to other cultivars you might want to try in 1996!

TABLE 1
HIGHLY RATED LANDSCAPE PERFORMANCE CULTIVARS FROM THE
FLOWER SEED TRIAL AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
1992-1994

ALYSSUM	*	MARIGOLDS -		PERTUNIA - Con't	
Snow Crystals	6"	<u>Tagetes patula</u>		Celebrity Burgundy	14"
Snowdrift	6"	Aurora Series	14"	Celebrity Chiffon Morn	12"
BEGONIAS -		Bonanza Series	12"	Celebrity Orchid Ice	14"
FIBROUS ROOTED		Hero Series	12"	Celebrity Pink Morn	14"
All Round Series	24"	PANSY		Celebrity Raspberry Ice	14"
Ambassador Series	12"	Clear Sky Series	6"	Celebrity Rose Star	14"
Party Series	16"	Crystal Bowl Series	6"	Horizon Pink	12"
Varsity Series	12"	Crystal Bowl Series	6"	Horizon Red	12"
		Fama Series	6"	Horizon Ruby	14"
		Maxim Series	6"	Horizon Salmon Halo	14"
		Skyline Series	6"	Madness Plum Crazy	12"
		Universal Series	6"	Madness Rose	12"
CELOSIA				Pearls Arctic Imp	12"
Pink Tassles	40"			Primetime Blue	12"
(Pink Candle)		PELARGONIUM -		Primetime Lavender	12"
(Flamingo Feather)		SEED		Primetime Light Blue	12"
DIANTHUS		Pinto Series	16"	Primetime Mid Blue	12"
Telstar Series	12"			Primetime Plum	12"
DUSTY MILLER		PETUNIA -		Primetime Rose Star	14"
Silver Dust	10"	GRANDIFLORA		Primetime Salmon Morn	14"
		Aladdin Salmon	14"	Purple Wave	8"
		Dreams Pink	14"	(Nice ground cover item)	
		Dreams Salmon	14"	PORTULACA	
HYPOESTES		Falcon Lilac	14"	Sundial Series	6"
Confettii Series	24"	Falcon Rose	14"	Sunnyside Series	6"
Splash Series	24"	Ultra Light Pink	14"		
		Ultra Pink	14"	RUDBECKIA	
IMPATIENS		Ultra Salmon	14"	Indian Summer	40"
Accent Series	10"				
Tempo Series	16"	PETUNIA - MULTIFLORA		VINCA	
MARIGOLDS -		Carpet Lilac	12"	Cooler Peppermint	12"
<u>Tagetes erecta</u>		Carpet Pink	12"	Cooler Rose	12"
Lady Series	36"	Carpet Salmon	12"	Parasol	18"
Marvel Series	24"	Carpet Sky Blue	12"	Tropicana Bright Eye	14"
Perfection Series	40"	Carpet True Blue	12"	Tropicana Rose	14"
		Carpet White	12"		

* Inches are general maximum height