

# Buying Last-Minute Annuals

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It's that time of year again — spring is around the corner, and summer isn't far behind. In spite of all the planning that you do during the winter, there are always a few details that escape attention until you are in the midst of the spring season, and a few surprises that can't be planned for anyway. Sure, you've contracted for the flowers you'll install on the course this year, but there are always the "unknowns" — the new flower border by the clubhouse, the area near the parking lot that needs a little extra color, the flower bed that will have to be replanted after being invaded by a golf cart.

How do you go about selecting and buying annuals at the last minute? What is a "quality plant"? How do you get the best buy?

The answers to those questions may lie in the greenhouse grower you've contracted to grow annuals for the season. Most growers who contract with golf courses, parks and landscape firms have enough volume and diversity to provide plants for those last-minute needs. Also, because you represent a continuing contract, they will go out of their way to help you. If they can't supply the plants, they can usually suggest another grower who can.

If you do find yourself in a situation where you must choose annuals at the last minute. Look for a grower who can supply (1) selection, (2) quality, (3) service and (4) reasonable prices.

### Selection

Most bedding plant growers produce a fairly wide selection, but there's more to look at than just numbers. Take a walk around the greenhouse, and ask some questions.

Is the selection of annuals quite standard, or are there some new introductions? If the grower is progressive, you should see some recent All-America Selections like *Cosmos* 'Sunny Red' and *Celosia* 'Century,' and some of the "newer crops" like the ornamental basil and New Guinea impatiens. You should also see some old stand-

bys that have proven themselves year after year, like disease-resistant multi-flora petunias and compact ageratums.

Can the grower recommend some annuals that will perform well on the golf course without requiring too much maintenance? Certainly, the geranium can't be topped for constant color, but you can't deny that it has some severe disease problems, and that it requires season-long pruning of old flowers to produce that continuous spectacular color. A good grower should be able to suggest some plants that will produce color all season with less labor. *Sanvitalia*, the "Creeping Zinnia," has gained some much-deserved attention since a cultivar named 'Mandarin Orange' was recently chosen as an All-America Selections winner. This 6-8" plant produces a constant display of small orange-yellow "daisies," and requires no extra maintenance after planting. It tolerates heat and drought, and demands only a well-drained soil in full sun. The new triploid marigolds are compact plants with large flowers, and because the plants do not set seed, they require less removal of spent flowers to promote rebloom. *Dusty Miller*, the bushy 10-14" plant with velvety silver leaves, performs with little maintenance. It combines well with all colors, and requires only full sun and good drainage.

Does the grower select cultivars of annuals with garden performance in mind? Many cultivars of annuals look great in the greenhouse, but don't perform well outdoors. Most pansy cultivars stop flowering during midsummer, but some, like the 'Viking' and 'Universal' series, continue to flower all season if grown in partial shade and pinched back occasionally. Many cultivars of blue salvia produce too much foliage and not enough flowers, but 'Victoria' produces an excellent display of blue flowers.

### Quality

When evaluating quality, look first at the greenhouse itself. It should be free

of insect and disease problems. The production and work areas should be clean and organized.

The plants themselves should display several characteristics. First, they should be compact and well-branched. Growth regulators are standard in the industry, and if used properly will yield a crop that is vigorous and well-branched, uniform and not too leggy. The effects of growth regulators wear off after a number of weeks, and the plants are ready to take off once set outdoors.

Second, the plants within a flat should be uniform — in height, vigor, color, general size and stage of development. A flat of variable-sized plants is hard to interpret — are some of the plants simply not as vigorous as others? Or was a growth regulator not evenly applied? Or did some plants get more fertilizer than others? Whatever the reason, if the plants are not uniform in the flat, they will probably not be uniform in the garden, either.

Third, look at plant health. Good foliage color is a sign of a good fertilizer regime. Pale green leaves, particularly on petunias, are often a sign of low nitrogen. Yellowish, weak foliage is sometimes a sign of overwatering. Sticky honeydew on leaves is a sign of an insect infestation (on bedding plants, honeydew would most often indicate aphids or whiteflies). While the insects may have been controlled by the time you see the plants, their feeding may have stunted the growth of the plants, or they may have transmitted a disease that will not be evident until after the plants are set outdoors. Check the plants' roots to make sure they are vigorous and white. Look for new growth and vigor.

### Service

Service varies from one grower to another. Some are strictly cash and carry, but most wholesalers who provide plants for businesses will set up accounts and deliver upon request, and some will do simple garden designs at no extra charge. If given advance notice, many growers will custom-grow a crop for your needs, even working around your crew's schedule so that you can plan ahead for spring planting. Some growers are willing to act as a "buyer" for their ongoing accounts, buying in a crop from another grower if they themselves cannot supply it.

A recent trend in the bedding plant



business has been the production of annuals in larger containers, usually 4" or 5" pots. While this is substantially more expensive per plant, there are some advantages. Larger plants are already in flower, and will produce an "instant effect" on the golf course. They generally transplant well, requiring less care in the first days after planting. Just as important, they can be a life-saver later in the summer, if a flower bed succumbs to a disease and must be replanted.

One characteristic of good service that is often overlooked is information. A greenhouse grower should be able to recommend colorful, high performance, low maintenance annuals, and even draw up a schedule of maintenance tasks for the summer. In buying plants, you should learn how often to fertilize, how often to remove old flowers, when to prune back, what insects and diseases to watch for, and other cultural requirements.

#### Price

The cheapest plants are not always the best, but good buys do exist. Weigh price against quality. Paying a few cents more for a higher quality plant may be a good investment. Do some comparison shopping. Talk to some growers and explain what you are looking for. In anticipation of future orders, some growers may offer you a very good price, or extra service.

Don't forget to check with a landscaper. It may be a good idea to hire a landscaper to design the flower beds, provide the plants and install the garden. Remember that your crew is busy during planting season!

#### Last minute tips for success with annuals. . .

Buying quality bedding plants is important, but it is only the first step. Here are some tips to help ensure high quality flower beds this summer.

- Pinch back leggy plants when setting them outdoors. Petunias in particular may become a bit leggy in the greenhouse. If pinched back at transplant time, they may take slightly longer to flower, but they will branch much better, and provide more color in the long run.

- If you are using a pre-emergent herbicide in a flower bed, rototill and rake out the bed, then apply the herbicide and rake it in lightly. Plant the transplants through the layer of soil containing herbicide granules, making sure the root ball penetrates slightly

below the herbicide layer. Many transplants suffer root damage when new roots grow into the soil layer containing herbicide granules.

- When planting annual seedlings, be sure to cover the entire root ball with soil. This is particularly important if the annuals are in peat or fiber pots, because the pots will dry out more quickly than the surrounding soil and act as a wick, carrying water out of the soil. It is also very important to cover the entire root ball of plants grown in a peat-lite mix. Because these mixes dry out quickly, leaving the root balls exposed at soil surface will stress young plants.

- Some annuals can be sown directly in the flower bed with excellent results. Sweet alyssum, a low-growing white or purple edging plant, can be seeded into the garden in early spring, and will provide good color all season. Moss rose, another edging plant with pastel flowers, develops very quickly from seed. Sow the seed after all danger of frost. Because this plant tends to die back by late summer, you might want to seed a second time in early summer, scattering the seed among the established first crop. Dwarf French marigolds can be seeded directly into the garden, producing

flowers in six to eight weeks. Zinnias often become quite leggy in the spring greenhouse, but when they develop quickly in the heat of summer they are much stockier. A strong, healthy crop of zinnias can be grown by seeding it directly into the garden after all danger of frost is past.

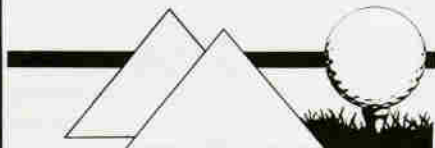
- Allow young annuals to become established for a few weeks before mulching. This practice promotes better root system development. Also, because many mulches cool the soil, they should not be applied in the spring when you want as much warmth as possible for rapid plant development. Plant the seedlings and allow them to develop for a few weeks, then weed, water and mulch.

- If you purchase hanging baskets for use around the club house, chances are you will be using shade-tolerant plant materials, and locating them on the east side of the building, or under an overhang. Remember that plants under an overhang receive little precipitation, and may require watering more frequently than those plants in an open area. Be sure to turn the baskets weekly or biweekly, to promote a more rounded, symmetrical shape.

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