

PLANNING AHEAD FOR COLORFUL AND MIXED VARIETIES IN PLANTING DESIGNS

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Autumn is a good time to sit back and reflect on the performance of annual plantings during the past season and begin planning next year's combinations. It is easier to visualize the size, color compatibility, and design impact when looking at the plants in a garden than it is when thumbing through a seed catalog or gardening book. The success or failure of certain plants in the specific growing site can be noted. Plant growth may reflect drainage problems, shade that is too dense for the particular plant, or presence of a soil-borne disease.

Any conclusions reached should be viewed in the light of the particular growing season. If the latter part of summer has been unusually wet, it is not uncommon to witness poor performance of geraniums and petunias. Frequent rains spoil the



Mixed border near the entrance to the Agricultural Technical Institute in Wooster, OH, shows salmon cannas, mixed coleus, blue salvia, blue petunias, salmon geraniums, and ageratum. Mixed plantings can add interest to building entrances where viewers can see the plant material at close range.

flowers and high humidity provides ideal conditions for fungus growth. During a more normal season, these flowers will bloom profusely and can rightfully form the color backbone of the landscape.

Versatile Plantings

Some flowering annuals are slow to get established in the spring, but once they start growing they provide a reliable source of color under a wide range of environmental conditions. Vinca or periwinkle (*Catharanthus roseus*) is one such plant. During cool spring weather, especially if this condition is combined with moisture and fertilizer stress, the young plants may look chlorotic and

show little growth. As the season progresses and temperatures increase, the plants fill in, giving a rich green mat of shiny foliage topped with hundreds of delicate pink and white blossoms. The plants hold up under periods of extreme heat and prolonged drought but are not damaged by frequent rains and high humidity.

Wax begonias remain one of the most reliable plants for garden color throughout the entire season. They bloom freely both in sun and shade, making them an excellent choice when light conditions vary significantly within a given planting area. When flower beds are partly shaded by trees or extend around to the north side of a building, a sun loving annual in these beds will not perform well. Fibrous rooted wax begonias flower heavily in the sun; however, foliage may be somewhat sun scorched. This blemish is seldom very noticeable since the plant is covered by so many flowers. Wax begonias can tolerate drier conditions than impatiens but grow and develop much better when adequate water is available.

Begonias fill out into nice mound-shaped plants. Although plants spaced 8 inches apart will quickly fill in forming a solid ground cover, some feel that a greater spacing allows for more definition of the plant's natural growth habit and requires fewer plants per planting area. Another aspect to consider is that greater spacing allows for more air movement around the plant and reduces the probability of disease problems during wet, humid weather. Wax begonias are good candidates for well delineated planting patterns and also combine well with other plants in mixed plantings.

Petunias are a widely used annual and a favorite of many groundskeepers for sunny areas. When they are in full bloom they are very showy; however, they do have a few drawbacks. After a peak of bloom in late June or early July, the plants become tall and lanky, often breaking over. This condition is worsened if there is a lot of rain. Water tends to spot the petals, and rain, especially when it is accompanied by wind, riddles the open flowers and helps break down the plants. The solution is to cut back the plants several inches, which induces lateral branching and eventually more compact flowering stalks. But while this vegetative rejuvenation is occurring, the petunia bed is devoid of color. This problem can be lessened by cutting back different areas of the bed at different times so that future blooming peaks are staggered. Starting the growing season with compact, stocky plants will also result in improved growth throughout the season. When petunias are grown in combination with other plants, either in the ground or in containers, the legginess is less of a problem, since the other plants serve as a source of support and new blossoms continue to form on the ends of stems.

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Flowers That Highlight Certain Seasons

Some flowering plants provide spectacular seasonal color. The spring flowering bulbs are a good example of this. Bulbs planted in the fall develop into showy harbingers of spring without much special care. The bulbs make a good alternative planting with annuals since they can be planted after frost has killed the annuals. In the spring, they finish flowering before it is safe to set out most annuals. The bulbs can either be removed before planting the annuals or the annuals can be set between the bulb foliage. The foliage must be allowed to die back naturally so that enough food is stored in the bulbs for growth and flowering the subsequent year. If this method is practiced, there is a period in late May and early June when the beds look a bit untidy, but it is an economical and labor-saving technique for bulbs that retain their quality year after year.

Narcissus are excellent plants for reliable spring bloom. They multiply over the years and do not usually decrease in flower size. Tulips are less robust and usually produce smaller flowers with much less uniformity the second year. Hyacinths are showy and fragrant the first year, but are notorious for running downhill in successive years.

Chrysanthemums are outstanding for fall color and are especially valuable when early frosts kill many of the annuals. Chrysanthemums can be grown in beds by themselves or mixed with other plants. Since no color can be expected from them until late August or early September, patches of mums should be scattered among other flowers or perhaps placed to the back of a border. Violas are a good candidate to plant with mums. These frost tolerant plants can be put out very early in the season when the mums are small. Violas perform best when temperatures are cool but many varieties bloom throughout the summer.

Foliage Plants

Some foliage plants can be used effectively by themselves or as a reliable backbone in the annual garden. Coleus is a showy plant, free of insect and disease problems. It can be used in shade or full sun to give showy mounds of interesting foliage. Rain may cause many flowers to fade but the bright color of coleus will be unaffected.

Dusty miller is an extremely dependable plant that combines well with almost all other annuals. The silvery leaves tie together other colors that might normally clash. Silver and white give unity to planting and enhance other colors. Red begonias and nicotiana appear more red when accented with white than they do by themselves.

Kochia, parsley, opal basal, flowering kale, amaranthus and 'Irish Lace' marigold are plants grown primarily for their foliage. They can be combined to make an all foliage garden with interesting color and texture variation. When combined with other flowers they can compliment or accent the flower color.

Garden Designs

Planting designs should be worked up before plant material is purchased. There is no right or

wrong scheme. One should be aware of different possibilities and constantly look for new combinations. Otherwise, one can fall into a rut of planting the same thing year after year.

The simplest scheme is a bed of all one variety of plant. Large areas of a single color have high visual impact and carry a great distance. Red geraniums against a railroad tie retaining wall are distinctive and can be seen many yards away.

Mixed colors of a single plant variety can be used to add more interest to a bed without getting into any complexities of combining plants. Beds of mixed floral carpet snapdragons, mixed zinnias, or mixed portulacca can sparkle like jewels in the sun. The variation lures the onlooker to come closer and examine the different colors.

Simple borders of two or three plants usually require plants of different height. Shorter plants are placed in the front of the border or outside of the bed. The result is a stair-stepping effect. Color combinations may be either contrasting or analogous. An example of a contrasting color scheme is 'Nicki Red' nicotiana and white sweet alyssum. Yellow sunflowers and orange African marigolds with gold dwarf marigolds in the foreground provide an analogous color scheme with considerable height difference.

More complex planting schemes may include geometric and mixed designs. Patterned designs are usually somewhat formal. Triangles of dusty miller may enframe areas of wax begonias, geraniums, ageratum, or other plants of approximately the same height. Designs of flags, maps, clocks, or faces are possible if tidy plants with a low growth habit are selected. Wax begonias, telanthera, santolina, and parsley are good choices.

Mixed plantings can be used to give a European look or a more informal country garden appearance. Combinations of several plants are best appreciated when viewed close up. They are good near entrances to buildings or places that are not passed by too rapidly. An advantage of this type of planting is that during the growing season those plants which are best adapted to the weather or soil conditions take over while the others recede into the background. This may be referred to by some as a "never-fail" approach to gardening. It is practical since one never can predict accurately what kind of a season is ahead.

In planning a mixed planting, one should scatter the various plants throughout the area with the taller ones being generally placed toward the back. The stair-stepping effect should be staggered gradually toward the front. The larger more dominant plants are usually placed first, with smaller accent plants added last. One possible combination set in front of a background of salmon cannas is assorted coleus, blue salvia, salmon geraniums, salmon wax begonias, and blue ageratum. Another good background plant is cleome.

If you are not familiar with some of these plants, now is a good time to look for them and decide if they would be an asset to your grounds. If you haven't tried some of the different plants, plan to do so next year. Variety not only pleases the public but makes the groundskeepers job more exciting.

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