

Annuals

glow with smart design & care

by LOIS BERG STACK, Ph.D.



An annual flowers can add exciting color to any landscape. Yet too often, annual flower gardens fail because the flower beds are improperly prepared, the plants are selected without considering the location's environment, the design just doesn't work, or maintenance falls short of the plants needs.

Whatever experience you have had with annuals, here are four great reasons why you should consider them when you develop or renovate a landscape.

Always something new

New annuals are introduced every year, and many of the recent introductions are well worth a try. For example, "Purple Wave" and other "new petunias" will change your mind forever about petunias. They branch early and remain low-growing, to produce an annual groundcover. If watered and fertilized properly, they flower all season without any deadheading.

Containers more popular

Containers have become an important part of landscapes. Large, decorative clay pots, free-form tufa containers and hanging baskets are everywhere. Many of these containers are beautiful themselves, but

when filled with high-quality, colorful annuals, they become focal points in any landscape. Containers allow places for plants to grow in difficult sites that would otherwise be barren.

Fragrance a feature

We have become much more creative in our definition of which plants we think of as "annual flowers," and the reasons for their use in the landscape have expanded beyond color. Fragrance has become much more important, with designers rediscovering old-fashioned plants like mignotte and heliotrope and asking for more varieties of plants like the scented geraniums.

Many people have expressed a desire for annuals that make good landscape specimens and can also be used as cut flowers indoors. Garden designers are adding more and more herbs to add color and texture. And no wildlife landscape would be complete without an annual garden of butterflyweed, cosmos, flowering tobacco and salvia to attract butterflies and moths.

Plentiful supply

Annuals are more available than ever before. They are produced in great numbers and variety by greenhouses throughout the country. Growers can produce an-

nuals in almost any size you want, at almost any time you want them. It is truly possible for anyone to develop a garden with instant color in the cool spring (or winter in the deep south), replace the entire planting with a mid-season garden of annuals, and finish the year with a fresh fall planting.

Season-long beauty

A professionally-designed annual garden should look good every day of the season. Avoid annuals that do not perform to this standard, and concentrate on those that do. Choose plants that produce many weeks of color with low maintenance. The annuals listed on page 19 are recommended as a starting point. They are readily available, require little or no deadheading or pruning during the season, are relatively pest-free, and provide weeks of high-quality color in the landscape.

When you select plants, remember their placement within the flower garden is as important to visual success as the placement of the garden within the landscape. Follow these ideas for effective annual flower garden design:

1. Use masses of a few types of annuals,

cont. on page 20

10 Great Annuals for the Landscape

Geranium, dusty miller, French marigold, impatiens, wax begonia...what else can you plant in the landscape? The following annuals produce maximum color, are reliable, do not need deadheading or pruning, and have few pest or cultural problems.

Brassia oleracea "Acephala Group" ("Flowering Cabbage/Kale")

Size and form: 12-18 inch open cabbage, with wavy-edged or deeply lobed leaves.
Color: foliage turns white, pink or purple in cool weather.
Environment: cool fall temperatures in the North; good winter plant in South; sun.



Best attributes: develops interest in fall/winter, after other plants decline.
Recommended types: many series available; choose for color and form.

Catharanthus roseus "Annual Vinca"

Size and form: 12-18 inch mounds
Colors: pinks, white
Environment: warm to hot temperatures; full sun; well-drained soil
Best attributes: does well in droughty conditions; self-cleaning flowers.
Recommended types: several

series available; choose for height and color.

Cleome hasslerana, ("Spider Flower")

Size and form: four feet tall, four feet wide; well-branched, upright.



Colors: pinks, lavender, white
Environment: does well in droughty conditions; full sun.
Best attributes: large plant fills big space; self-cleaning.
Recommended types: "Queen" series has good color and branching.

Gypsophila muralis, 'Gypsy' ("Gypsy Annual Baby's breath")

Size and form: eight to 10 inches tall, perfect mound all season.
Color: small pale pink flowers in profusion.

Environment: tolerates droughty conditions after established; full sun.

Best attributes: perfect cloud of tiny pink flowers all season.

Lobularia maritima ("Sweet Alyssum")

Size and form: two to six inch spreading mound; great edging plant around garden.
Colors: white, pinks, rose, lavender.

Environment: full sun in cool northern sites; light shade in other locations; late fall and winter planting in South.

Best attributes: fragrant, profuse flowering; shear back in midsummer in hot, full sun locations.

Recommended types: many excellent types; choose for color and size.

Nierembergia hippomanica 'Mont Blanc' ("Mont Blanc Cup Flower")

Size and form: four inches tall, 16-inch spread; great edging plant.
Color: white.

Environment: full sun, average soil conditions.

Best attributes: good substitute for alyssum in hot locations; self-cleaning.

Petroselinum crispum, "Parsley"

Size and form: eight-inch vase-shaped plants, most with crinkled leaves.

Colors: green foliage.

Environment: full sun; tolerates many soils.

Best attributes: excellent quality; crisp foliage all season.

Recommended types: any of the crinkled-leaf types.

Petunia x hybrida 'Purple Wave' (Purple Wave Petunia)

Size and form: four inches tall, four feet across; very well-branched.



Color: Purple.

Environment: full sun; well-drained soil; moisture; high fertility.

Best attributes: self-cleaning; riveting color; wide spreading. Other recommended types: several series of "new petunias," all propagated from cuttings, provide similar form and other colors.

Sanvitalia procumbens ("Creeping Zinnia")

Size and form: 16 inches tall, 24 inches across; loose mound of tiny stems and leaves.

Colors: yellow or gold-orange flowers, one-inch across.

Environment: full sun; hot, dry locations.

Best attributes: self-cleaning; never spectacular, but reliably high-quality.

Recommended types: 'Mandarin Orange' has slightly more orange flowers.

Zinnia angustifolia, 'Star White' & 'Crystal White' ("Narrow-leaved Zinnia")

Size and form: 'Star White' forms 18-inch mound; 'Crystal



White' forms 10-inch mound.

Colors: white daisies with yellow center.

Environment: full sun; tolerant of many soils.

Best attributes: self-cleaning; neat habit; very resistant to powdery mildew. □



Wide bands of colorful annuals decorate this golf course. Yellow: French marigold; blue: petunia; silver: dusty miller; purple: purple-leaved basil.

rather than a few each of many different plants.

2. Space plants far enough apart to promote branching, fullness and sturdiness. Most annuals should be spaced 12-20-inches apart. Each plant is different. The "new petunias" can reach a spread of four feet, even in Maine!

3. Create lines and masses of color that mirror other lines in the landscape (the shape of the flower bed, the curve of the pathway, the line of a fence or wall).

4. Highlight pink, blue or purple flowers by planting silver-leaved plants like dusty miller around them.

5. Plant a uniform edging around the

garden to unify it.

Maintain from day one

Good maintenance starts on planting day. After you select plants for your design, buy the highest-quality specimens available. Keep them well-watered in a protected holding location. If possible, plant on a cool or overcast day. Water the plants well, and remove them from their containers. Set them into the garden, take care to lightly bury their entire root balls, and firm the soil to stabilize the plants. Irrigate newly-planted sections of the garden as you proceed, to prevent plant stress. When planting annuals valued for their first spike of flowers, like snapdragons, select young

plants and leave their flower spikes intact. When planting other flowering annuals, remove open flowers at planting time, to direct their energy into rooting. This sacrifice of early flowers will be offset later in the season with increased flower production and drought tolerance.

Mulch to reduce weed competition and maintain even soil moisture. Weed regularly. Remove weeds



Annuals grow best in deep, well-drained loam with four to five percent organic matter.

Note design potential of site

Annual gardens require a significant investment in plants and labor. They are worth every cent of that investment if they achieve their potential. To ensure high performance within the landscape design, select a site where a colorful focal point will have the greatest visual impact and fulfill a design function. A wide, low curve of color draws the viewer's attention across a distance. A brightly-colored compact garden helps the viewer focus on a smaller area within a landscape.

Keep the lines of the planting clean and simple.

Start with a soil test

Choose an area free of tree roots.

Soil should be a deep, well-drained loam with four to five percent organic matter.

Remove existing sod and till the soil to a depth of six to eight inches.

Add lime, fertilize and/or organic matter according to the results of the soil test. Do not cut corners here. In many ways, the success of soil preparation will affect the success of the planting. □

early in the season, before they drop seeds, to reduce weed populations later in the season.

Water as needed. Most annuals require one to one-and-a-half inches of water per week, including rainfall and irrigation. One thorough irrigation per week is better than several light sprinklings. Monitor flower gardens regularly and solve problems before they become serious. Pesticides are often unnecessary with proper site and plant selection, soil preparation and planting techniques, and effective monitoring and roguing. **LM**

The author is extension specialist in ornamental horticulture at the University of Maine.

Photos by Lois Berg Stack.