



Impatiens, such as this Fanfare Bright Coral Spreading variety, grow in sun or part shade.

# Annuals

## it pays to be picky

Remember, every bad plant you don't plant in the first place is one you won't have to replace later.

BY JEFF GIBSON

**A**nuals are go-to plants for providing masses of color in landscape designs. Color in the landscape automatically becomes a focal point drawing the viewer's gaze immediately. So, it's crucial to choose the right plants for the project.

Not all annuals are created equal: even varieties in the same species can differ greatly in terms of landscape performance and maintenance needs. Clients, whether commercial or residential, expect the

landscape professionals they hire to install the best plants for the job. Get it right, and you've got a beautiful landscape that you can use to not only get repeat business, but also to attract new customers. Get it wrong, and you've got a potentially costly, time-consuming problem. Getting it right doesn't have to be difficult.

First, stay on top of what's new and what's best for landscape applications. A little research goes a long way. Start with your grower supplier, who can be an invaluable source of information about what's new in the marketplace. Often, growers have opportunities to trial plants

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before they're commercially introduced. Your grower may be able to offer great insight on the performance attributes of new annual plants. If you don't already work with a grower, start now.

Check with your local grower or landscape associations, or research online at sites such as BallLandscape.com. Visit university trials, trade shows and even local garden centers to see a wide array of varieties first-hand. Talk with knowledgeable people about what's new. Also, read consumer gardening magazines; writers for these magazines often get advanced looks at new plants and tell their readers

about their favorites. Many of your customers are reading these magazines. Finally, go online and you'll find a huge amount of information about top plants for landscapes, often available specifically by region.

#### Know your planting sites

Before you order any plants, perform an analysis of the project site. Pay special attention to environmental factors such as sunlight levels, moisture, wind, general temperatures and any existing structures or plants. Measure the planting area, of course, so you'll know how many plants you need to fill the space. Talk with the client about preferred or disliked colors and ongoing maintenance, of course.

Order from your grower as far in advance as possible — four to six months prior to installation if possible. This can vary depending on the type of plant and the grower's own policies. Because most annuals only require a few months for growers to produce, ordering early allows you to have the best chance of getting exactly what you want, when you want it.

When it comes to choosing a good plant, start from the bottom up. Pull a couple of plants out of their pots or trays and look at the roots; if they're healthy and white, and if there are lots of roots,



Petunias, like the Tidal Wave Cherry Spreading, version are fast growing.

chances are the rest of the plant is healthy, too. Examine the leaves, which should exhibit good color no matter what color they are (not all leaves are green, of course). A flowering plant should be installed when about one-quarter of the blooms are open, with a lot of buds to show more flowers are coming soon. At this stage, plants recover well from transplanting stress and get used to their new environment more quickly and easily.

Make sure there are no signs of disease such as wilting, spots, discolored leaves or misshapen flowers, buds or foliage. (Even if you don't know the scientific name for what makes a plant look unhealthy, you can usually tell when one looks "sick.") And just remember that if you wouldn't plant it in your own yard, your client doesn't want it in theirs, either. When in doubt, remember that every bad plant you don't plant is one you won't have to pay to replace later.

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