

Annuals are plants that cannot be relied upon to return from one year to the next. Some will overwinter in milder years, and some will reseed themselves, but most should be planted fresh each season. The great benefit of annuals, however, is that during their season of bloom they will bloom their hearts out for you, putting on a season-long show. They are, therefore, excellent choices for containers or for beds where you want a lot of color for a long period of time, outperforming most perennials in that regard. Annuals add WOW to your garden and containers.

When choosing your annuals, consider the sun exposure and the effects you want to create with regards to height, fragrance, color, etc.

Annuals can be grown from seed or transplanted as starts. Obviously you get more for your money if you start from seed, but the plants will require more of your time and effort before they reach flower bearing size. Also, many varieties of specialty annuals are not available as seeds. Starter plants will take less of your time and attention and immediately transform your flower bed from bare ground to an instant bouquet. Starts provide both instant and long-term gratification.

Planting in the ground:

Whether you start from seed or purchased plants, adequate soil preparation is important. Plants are like people: they need nutrition, water, and air to thrive. The ideal soil is loose enough to allow water and air to penetrate to the roots and to allow roots to penetrate easily through the soil. It should be moisture retentive but not waterlogged.

In your beds, turn and loosen your soil to a depth of 8-12 inches. Adding organic matter (compost or composted manure) will improve most soils with respect to aeration, nutrients, drainage, and water retention. Spread 2-3" of organic matter over the area to be planted and thoroughly mix it in to a depth of about 9".

Follow these steps when transplanting. First, do the planting on cloudy days or else early in the morning or late in the afternoon. Make the planting hole generous in size (both in depth and width) and backfill the bottom of the hole with loose soil. Water both the plant and the hole well. Most annuals will come in individual pots or in cell packs which allow each plant individual space for its roots. If seedlings' roots do need to be separated, use a knife. If the plant is rootbound, make shallow vertical cuts in the rootball in 3 or 4 places or gently "rough up" the roots to encourage them to spread out once planted.

Set the plant into the hole slightly below ground level. Backfill, leaving a shallow basin around the stem for watering. Using a starter/transplant fertilizer can help to reduce transplant shock. If it's hot and sunny, provide shade if necessary for a few days while your plants are adjusting to their new surroundings. You can use shade cloth or newspaper tents supported by stakes to shade the seedlings.

Planting in Containers and Hanging Baskets:

Annuals don't change their needs when planted in containers, but they are more dependent on you to meet those needs.

Always use a good commercial potting soil in your containers; don't try to use garden soil. For fuchsias and other annuals that prefer never to dry out completely, you might use a moisture-retentive soil, or mix some Soil Moist water-retaining crystals into your potting soil.

You can fertilize at planting time with Osmocote Flower & Vegetable Food, or plan on fertilizing every two weeks during the growing season with a liquid fertilizer (see below).

If you have a sunroom or greenhouse, in March or April you can fill hanging baskets with economical 2" starter plants for growing on to bring outside in May, bursting with blooms.

Annual Care:

They're planted, now what? Weeding, feeding, watering, and grooming will keep your annuals in peak condition throughout their lives.

Watering should be done gently, thoroughly, and in the morning. Watering from above in the midday sun can cause blisters on the foliage, while watering late in the day can encourage fungus diseases. The weather and plants' individual requirements will determine how often you need to water; a good rule of thumb is to let the surface of the soil get slightly dry before watering again. When you do water, the soil should be thoroughly moistened several inches down. Sprinkling from above may damage or break some plants, so you may want to invest in drip irrigation or a soaker hose. Mulches can be applied in annual beds to help retain moisture, keep the soil temperature more constant, and discourage weeds.

For containers, it is important to check water needs once or twice daily in hot or windy weather. Smaller containers, terra cotta pots, or hanging baskets can dry out in less than a day; some days you may need to water both morning and afternoon to keep your plants from wilting (the only exception to the "water in the morning" rule). Conversely, containers with saucers can become waterlogged during the rainy season and may need to be emptied.

Fertilizing annuals is extremely important to keep them growing and blooming. Use a liquid or water-soluble fertilizer formulated to make flowers bloom—usually the middle number on the package will be highest. Fertilize every 2 weeks. Follow package instructions carefully—too strong a concentration can burn your plants.

Proper and consistent care of your annuals will give you a full growing season of color. The life cycle of an annual is to grow, bloom, set seed, and die. Stresses such as too hot, too cold, lack of nutrients, drought, or irregular watering could trigger the plant to harden its tissues, cease growth, and set seeds. (For an annual, this is a survival skill.) Keeping your plants well fed and watered is thus very important. Also, groom your plants regularly—removing the spent flowers helps to keep your annuals from setting seed.