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All about Annuals

Annual gardens

Gardeners love annuals because of their infinite variety and their lasting blooms. You can plant different annuals year after year and never run out of choices of shape or color. As with music or food, familiarity with annual flowers deepens your enjoyment of them.

Since annuals complete their life cycle in one growing season and in northern climates the growing season is limited, sowing seed directly into the garden **after all danger of frost is past** makes it too late to start many of these plants outside. We all know that the earlier a plant starts, the longer you'll have to enjoy the blooms.

Choosing bedding plants

Younger plants often give better results; mature, leggy or heavy blooming ones are often rootbound and don't transplant well; choose plants with compact foliage and healthy leaf color; keep in mind the visual arrangement or design of the bed you are creating and choose sizes and colors that complement each other.

Making your bed

Check your garden soil to make sure there is enough good topsoil. Flower beds need 8 to 12 inches of good quality soil. No matter what condition your soil is in, it's always a good idea to add a large amount of organic matter, well rotted manure or compost mixed with peat moss for example, to your garden at the beginning of each growing season. It's also beneficial to mix in some inorganic fertilizer or bone meal as well. Organic matter works like a sponge, allowing the soil to hold nutrients and water, resulting in healthy, strong plants. Micro-organisms tend to deplete nitrogen quickly as the organic material decomposes, so additional fertilizer will help replenish your garden soil.

Hardening off your seedlings at least a week prior to planting will give them a better start. Put them outdoors in partial sun for one hour the first day, then increase the time gradually over a week until they are out all day long. Remember they're growing fast, so be sure to give them water every day.

When to plant

Many annuals can be planted outside early without any danger of damage from frost or snow. For an early garden, use annuals that can withstand light frosts. Pansies and snapdragons are frost hardy and can be planted in early April in most locations.

How to plant

Water the flats of baby plants well and let them sit for a few minutes before planting. This gives the roots a head start on moisture. Dig a hole big enough for the plant roots to be below the surface level of the soil. Pinch the bottom of each cell in the plastic pack to make it easier to remove the plants.

Gently loosen each root ball to enable the roots to spread into the soil as the plants grow. Set the plant in the hole and fill in the soil around and above the roots. Press down with your fingers and then step on the soil around the plant, to make a solid contact between earth and roots. Water the plants deeply and finish with a dose of plant starter fertilizer to promote quick root growth. After transplanting keep your plants very moist for at least a week to establish them. Little plants can die from the elements so protect transplants from heavy rain, wind and hot sun for the first week or two.

Protection tips

- Large can with tops & bottoms removed offer excellent protection.
- Newspaper tents keep sun and cold air off. Keep papers in place with stones.
- Shingle screens keep wind from damaging your transplants.
- Gallon plastic milk containers protect young plants from low temperatures.

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Care and feeding annuals

Once they're established caring for annuals is easy. Aside from pulling weeds, there are only four things to do: feeding, watering, mulching, and deadheading.

Feeding

Plants need food to grow just like people. Select the type of fertilizer for the plants' needs, for example: blooming plants would use a fertilizer high in phosphorous.

Watering

Plants need water to survive. If you live in a rainy climate nature will automatically look after this for you. During average weather conditions we need to supplement the rain with a regular watering routine. To water properly, you must have patience. To be effective the water must reach all the roots. So a good soaking is best. It's better to water thoroughly less often than to do short waterings more frequently. Once the garden is soaked thoroughly, wait a few minutes for the water to penetrate and then water again. Gardens open to the sun and wind require this type of watering at least once a week.

Mulching

A layer of mulch is as comforting to a plant as a warm blanket on a cold night is to us. Mulching is laying down loose material on the soil surface. Mulching: keeps weeds down; keeps the soil warm promoting quicker plant germination and growth; keeps the soil from drying out; and, if an organic mulch is used, it will over time improve the soil. To be most effective mulch should be laid on in the late spring about 3 inches thick and left alone. Mulching allows you to decrease watering frequency by about a third, and eliminates hoeing between the rows. Organic mulches include straw, peat moss, sawdust, dry manure, and bark chips. Inorganic mulches include aluminum foil, newspaper, and polyethylene film.

Deadheading

Plants will go to seed once their blooms are finished. That's nature. But a trick called deadheading will stop the plant from setting seed too soon. Remove the faded flowers from the plant by pinching off the flower head. Now the plant will spend its energy producing more flowers instead of seed.

Deadheading will not only encourage many more flowers it will create a longer blooming period. Another tip to increase plant growth is to pinch the central growing tip of the plant. This will produce side shoots further down the stem, creating a bushier plant that will produce more flowers throughout the season.