

Here Today: Gone Tomorrow!

Don't you think it is time for a good word about annuals? Annuals are those plants that complete their life cycle – growth, flowering, reproduction, death- within one year. They have no time to waste so they flower abundantly. Biennials grow their first year, reproduce and die in the second. Technically, a perennial is a plant that lives more than two years. However, since we remember daylilies that survived their gardeners by decades, we tend to expect long life from all perennials, a vain expectation.

Annuals, bless their hearts, make it clear that they will give their all in just one year. Some of them do return. You will find Johnny-jump-ups popping up here and there years after the parent plant is gone and both larkspur and cleome self-seed and if not inadvertently weeded away, will bloom, but often in different colors. Even petunias will occasionally self-sow but, as hybrids, their offspring are usually a disappointment.

Gardeners often sow annual seeds inside to rush the season but many varieties can be sown outside where you want them to flower. They will be labeled 'hardy annual' on the seed packet and will not mind cold spring nights. Nasturtiums, poppies, larkspur, sunflowers, and lavatera (mallow) are some of the hardy annuals.

Those considered 'half-hardy' should not go into the ground until danger of frost is over so they are often started as a kitchen counter project. Marigolds, zinnias, petunias, cosmos, asters (not the fall sorts but the callistephus) and impatiens are some of the half-hardy annuals. One, new to me, is nolana. It belongs to the same solanaceae family as the petunia, has a trailing habit with succulent foliage and blue, purple, and white bells with a distinctive white and yellow throat. Wouldn't they be pretty in baskets or containers? As they are drought tolerant and love hot sunny borders, nolana seeds might be a happy find for here.

Don't feel you are any less a 'real' gardener if you skip the seed-starting and just fill your car with flats of annuals neatly grown by someone else and ready to plop into the ground. Work up the ground in advance and if it is hard and unyielding, work compost into it.

Traditionally annuals flourished in the gardens which are called cottage gardens today, a kindly unpretentious phrase which is a cover for the stuffed and vibrant and messy array of blooms most of us dearly love. They are the antithesis of the neat grass and evergreens that characterize very proper neighborhoods.

There are new versions of old favorites this spring. 'Double Click Rose Bonbon' cosmos is a decided departure from the image 'cosmos' conjures. It is a pink pom-pom 3-4 inch fully double wow. The seeds can be sown directly into well-drained poor soil after danger of frost is passed. Like all annuals, this must be dead-headed to keep it flowering to frost.

Breeders are developing all sorts of anomalies: for example, there is a begonia for sun! This series of sun tolerant begonias is named "Big" and comes in red with green foliage, rose with bronze and red with bronze. This cultivar would work in a spot with both sun and shade but where you wish to have a lot of one plant. This is another asset of the less expensive annuals- lots of the same plant. To avoid a scattered, piecemeal look, it is good to have more than a few of each plant, but a budget buster with many choices.

Another fashion we expected to see, given the passion for purple, is the use of contrasting chartreuse/lime blooms. Even a sunflower, *Helianthus debilis* 'Key Lime Pie' comes with a chartreuse disk, a neat contrast to *H. annuus* 'Claret' a dark chocolate with a metallic sheen. These hybrids do not tower but grow to an adaptable four to five feet. One richly purple petunia is 'Blue Velvet' with large double flowers. Combined in a container with a chartreuse coleus, it would stop traffic! Annuals provide a rich palette for gardeners wishing to experiment.