

Annuals



I'm sure I'm not the only person to have described annual flowers as brash, gaudy, exuberant, and too uniform. And yet that's exactly why I plant them. Like most Alaskans who enjoy seven months of snow, I find that color—any color, the brighter and more electric the better—makes summer come alive.

So each winter I follow a ritual along with many other gardeners all over the Northwest: perusing catalogs and searching greenhouses for the newest, most unusual annuals for my garden.

Our fondness for colorful annuals is evident all around us. Yes, it's true that they make up the precise (and predictable) patterns of floral clocks and theme displays

in public gardens. But what about those piercing blue billows in the giant hanging baskets and planters along the streets of my hometown of Fairbanks? Annual lobelia. Those brilliant spots of season-long color in mixed borders? Starry cosmos. The pure white and sensational chartreuse plants that electrify my shade



garden and make it glow against the framework of trees and shrubs? A mix of impatiens and coleus. The bright surprises that pop up here and there in my vegetable garden and along a stone path? Reseeding Johnny-jump-ups and poppies. And at the far northern edges of the Pacific Northwest, what garden would be complete without season-extending pansies and

violas, those tough, hardy flowers that keep blooming long after the first fall frosts?

HOW THEY GROW

Annuals are plants whose life cycle occurs entirely in one growing season, from seed germination, through flowering, and finally

to seed development. (But in my garden, this botanical definition mostly fits the weeds.) Only a handful of my annual flowers actually set seed; most exhaust their energies by naturally producing blankets of blooms, or I deadhead them to prevent seed formation and thus encourage more flowers. My garden is also full of plants that in milder climates are usually considered perennials, such as Shasta daisies (*Chrysanthemum maximum*) and black-eyed Susans. So I prefer to think of annuals as plants whose purpose has a definite time frame in the garden regardless of life span. They are single-season plants.

ANNUALS IN THE GARDEN

Annuals' fast growth from seed to full bloom is a necessity in cold climates, and their ease of cultivation makes them perfect candidates for a child's first garden as well as for the veteran landscaper searching for new combinations. I grow annuals for color. If I don't like a flower or a certain mix of blooms, I can try something new next season for relatively little cost.



ABOVE: An exuberant blend of brilliant mixed zinnias surrounds a pillar of of orange and yellow sunflowers. OPPOSITE PAGE: Introductions of annual vines such as this 'Alaska Mix' nasturtium feature stripes, stipples, and new color combinations.

By far the most popular display at the University of Alaska Georgeson Botanical Garden is the trial fields where we test 300 or so annual flowers each year. The Top 10 annuals highlighted in this chapter show just how varied this group of plants can be. You're bound to find something irresistible for your own Northwest garden. —PAT HOLLOWAY