

The blooming annual: A gardener's favorite

By Maria Fox

April showers bring May flowers — and plenty of them. Spring weather can be tricky, as we've certainly witnessed in our area the past few years. Snow, wind, sun and rain can all occur within a few days (or sometimes hours!) confusing plants and frustrating gardeners.

Luckily, as the old adage suggests, May with its forgiving weather, heralds the official beginning of gardening season. Milder more trustworthy temperatures lure gardeners out of their homes and seedlings out of their greenhouses to bask in the light of Mother Nature's finest season. This is the time when gardeners old or new get back to the dirt and nursery's begin filling their tables with the best the world of growing things has to offer.

New plant varieties pique the interests of more learned gardeners who've spent the winter reading about them. Planned garden projects are put into motion. Lawns are fed and beds are fortified. But, topping the list of plant cravings from a long winter and a blustery spring is the ever enduring and ever endearing: blooming annual. No gardener can resist them. Even the most stalwart of conifer purist becomes weak-kneed in the face of a per-

fect pansy.

Jenny Jorgensen, Nursery Manager at Wight's Home and Garden in Lynnwood, has been buying annuals for the store for over 15 years. Her experience has taught her the special place blooming annuals hold in the hearts of gardeners. Here is her list of the five most popular.

Geranium: Geraniums bloom big, bright and bold in a variety of colors. Geraniums are tough and resilient, growing well in pots as well as in beds. Aside from the trailing varieties, geraniums grow upright adding height and structure.

Impatiens: Great for brightening up shady garden spaces with their many varied colors including red, white, orange, lavender, and pink. Most varieties are low growing and shade loving, except the New Guinea which prefers some sun and will grow up to 14 inches tall. Gardeners love their many colors and varieties.

Pansy: No annual has more personality than the pansy, delivering its smiles through three and sometimes four seasons. Varieties abound and color variations offer dozens of wonderful choices. Pansies prefer a compact area so they are perfect for pots, but also do well in garden beds.

Lobelia: There are very few blue flowers and lobelia is one of them. Lobelia is

popular for trailing, but can also grow upright creating compact color spots or borders in deep royal blues, purples, white and yellow. A delicate looking plant, lobelia is actually quite hardy growing well in sun and part shade.

Petunia: An old fashioned favorite, petunias can be found in upright and trailing varieties and are great for sunny gardens areas. Colors include pink, white, lavender, yellow, and red. Modern varieties like "super-tunias" require no deadheading for easy care and the Wave petunia grows prolifically in all directions for carpets of color.

Here are some expert tips for successful growing. Plant color is of greatest importance so choose your plants to compliment and enhance the existing garden.

All annuals should be planted in groups to create a strong visual impact as well as to protect the plant from drying out on warmer days. Annuals come in several growing styles, each having their own characteristics that define where they are happiest. What you plant in a hanging basket or container garden may not be the same as what you'd plant in a bed so be sure their growing patterns are understood.

Plant them properly. Very few plants will thrive without good soil amendments. The nursery industry has poured millions into horticultural research for the ultimate suc-

cess of your garden. Read labels and talk with your local nursery staff who have years of hands on experience. There are plenty of good organic amendments on the market today, however, many gardeners trust their old synthetic standbys. No matter your choice, remember these two pointers: starter fertilizers will encourage healthy growth from the moment they're planted; combined with the proper use of good planting compost or potting soil for best success.

Maintenance is key. Don't expect your blooming plants to be vibrant and healthy without regular care. Beyond the obvious need for routine watering, proper fertilizing is also essential. Once a week is not uncommon, but once a month is a must. Many annuals require frequent care to remove spent blossoms (called deadheading) and unruly growth patterns. Not only is this maintenance good for the aesthetics of the plant, but it promotes more healthy blooms and foliage.

Information courtesy of Wight's Home & Garden, 5026 196th St. S.W., Lynnwood. Contact them at (425) 775-3636 or visit www.wights.com.

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