

# Annual Success

SIMPLE STEPS FOR AN EXOTIC DISPLAY

**A**lmost every gardener, even the most righteous plant person will succumb to the flash and panache of annuals at some point in their gardening careers. Fads will fade as we laugh at the calypso Petunia of yesteryear, that red and white striped clown of the garden, while today's annuals such as alyssum are out of fashion and Coleus are in, they were in the 70's as well. While popping in to see a student the other day at a local garden centre, I was amazed at the crowds hovering over the annual tables, like bees waiting for the flowers to open, while the perennial table and tree row stood in total abandonment. Who can blame the busy swarms at the annual table though, for even the most inexperienced gardener seldom resists the impulse of the brightly coloured exotics, to not plunge a few into the ground at the front door.

In the big picture of gardening, annuals are some of the more expensive plants we welcome in our garden. It is an annual affair and if we totalled the yearly replanting cost we could be astounded of how much we have spent. That \$1.25 pack of Petunias has surpassed the cost of the \$12.00 Hosta and we have not even considered the yearly labour cost of replanting.

So how do we get value from our annual choices? In the last column I introduced a few annuals that were given the distinction of the All America Selection. These are proven plants and thus is where it is wise to start if this is your first foray into the annual patch. Choose reliable, known plants and thus eliminating some of the mystery to their success. The second point to realize is that these plants are annuals and in their native habitat. They complete their growth cycle in one season hence they will need more attention than the perennial that maybe a little slower to do its 'business' but will be around for years.



When purchasing annuals at the garden centre look for plants with clean, healthy foliage. Check the underside of the leaves and the tips of the stem for problems such as bugs, aphids and whitefly; reject the plant if it harbours such wildlife. Next (and this is the difficult part), resist purchasing plants in flower. Granted as you carry that flat of green foliaged Petunias to the cash register you may receive disapproving looks from the so-called 'more experienced gardeners' as they whisper to themselves, "They must have just bought their first house and garden and really don't know what they're doing". You actually do; plants that aren't in flower are less stressed and adapt quicker when planted in the garden than those in full bloom.

Once you have determined the appropriate location for your annuals, read the associated care tag that is found in each pot, it will give you the ultimate size of the plant since we seldom give annuals the space they need to develop. The tag will also contain other important cultural information such as shade, sun, water and feeding requirements.



Annuals for the retail environment have been forced to grow quickly and in ideal conditions, if a second crop was being grown in the same greenhouse facility where you bought your plants they may not be hardened off. This is a process of lowering the temperatures and increasing light levels in preparation for planting outside. It is always wise to acclimatize your plants by gradually exposing them to increased light levels and cooler temperatures over a period of a week prior to planting. Keeping them in a cool sun porch or garage and moving them further into the sun each day will prevent sun-scalding at planting time.

Pinching young annuals will help produce sturdy well branched plants, often done before you purchase them as part of the green house production process. Pinching will help relieve some the transplant stress yet at the same time encourage more branching and robust plants a little later in the season. Pinching is easily done by removing young shoot growth with two full sets of leaves pinched to a leaf axil.

Feeding and watering are critical as the plants often hail from tropical climates which have rich soils. Let the soil dry down to root depth before watering, just before the plants go limp, and then water thoroughly. Less water is required once the plants become established and as the season progresses. Annuals generally have hearty appetites and are best fed with a liquid feed, a solid dissolved in water. The best approach is to use a balanced fertilizer, one with the same numbers such as 20-20-20, at the rate of one tablespoon per gallon of water once a week. Always make sure that the soil is moist before fertilizing, as dry soils and fertilizer may cause plant burn.

By following these simple steps, your annual display should pay dividends and reward you with an exotic display that is the showcase of the neighborhood.

*Michael Pascoe* NDP, ODH, CLT, MSc