

**Friday's Feature****By****Theresa Friday**

March 26, 2007

**Add a colorful splash to the landscape with annual flowers**

As spring arrives, gardeners all over the Gulf Coast are looking to add a touch of color to their landscape. Many will turn to the palette of annuals to start "painting" their masterpiece. Annuals are plants that are grown from seed, produce flowers and die in one growing season.

Here are a few suggestions that will help your annual garden turn into a colorful paradise.

Using annuals in the landscape requires some forethought. Remember that annual plantings are high maintenance. The beds need frequent grooming, watering and weeding. Because of this, it's usually a good idea to use annuals on a limited basis. Large, extensive beds quickly become a real chore to keep up.

Site selection is important. Choose an area that receives full sunlight all day, if possible. With few exceptions, most annual flowering plants bloom more profusely under high light conditions.

Most annuals grow well in a variety of soil types, as long as the soil holds enough moisture and drains well. Amending the soil will greatly improve your success with annual flowers in sandy soils.

With average garden soil, incorporate a two to three inch layer of organic matter. Compost, leaf mold and well-decomposed, stable manure are all good sources of organic matter. Turn the organic matter into the soil to a depth of about eight inches.

A basic fertilizer application can also be made during the preparation of beds. Apply at the recommended rate. The use of a complete, slow release product will reduce the need for frequent supplemental applications during the growing season.

Have the soil tested. A pH of 5.8 to 6.5 is satisfactory for most annuals. Most Gulf Coast

soils are slightly acid, and you may have to add lime to raise the pH.

When you buy your annuals, be sure to know which ones will survive all summer long. Choosing cool-season annuals such as snapdragons, pansies and petunias that do well during the winter are poor selections when purchased in March or April. To help select the correct annuals for a particular season contact your local Extension office. Online help is available from a UF/IFAS publication at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG018>.

Popular warm season annuals include ageratum, begonias, celosia, coleus, dusty miller, gaillardia, impatiens, marigolds, ornamental pepper, periwinkle (vinca), salvia, torenia and zinnia.

Look for stocky, dark green plants. Avoid any that are extremely tall, thin, pale or have brown or black spots on the leaves. It's best to avoid buying the plants with flowers. While it's nice to know what color you are getting, plants without flowers will be less stressed during the transplanting process.

When transplanting annuals, plant the seedlings no deeper than they grew originally. It is also advisable to slightly disturb the root ball to promote better rooting.

Apply a two to three inch layer of mulch. Good mulch materials include pine straw, pine bark and slightly decomposed leaves. Do not allow the mulch to touch the tender stems of the annuals.

Once plants are established, water thoroughly two or three times per week if sufficient rain does not occur. Irrigate during early morning hours or use trickle irrigation to reduce the incidence of leaf and flower diseases.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension>.