

Flowers for all seasons

Low maintenance evergreen gardens make sense in a busy world. Ever decreasing section sizes and diminishing time for gardening have fed the drive for 'low maintenance' plants that look the same all year round. But it's a shame to turn our backs on the things that make us feel great - colour, fragrance, variety, and seasonal highlights. Worldwide, the fashion wheel is turning back to flowers. It's possible to plant a garden with a fresh outbreak of colour every month of the year, but spring, especially, is all about flowers.

There are various ways to add flowers to a garden. Annuals are great value for a quick seasonal pick-me-up, offering a fresh new look each time you plant. Herbaceous perennials provide a wealth of flowers in a short space of time, returning to bloom year after year, but they do require attention and many of them go to ground for winter. Flowering trees and shrubs, once established, require the least maintenance of all.

Annuals are ideal for pots and relatively cheap, allowing scope for experimentation. We can merrily throw them away at the end of their flowering life, making way for next seasons annuals.

Technically, an annual is a plant that grows, flowers and sets seed within the space a year. Those that take longer (up to two years) are called biennials. Many old fashioned species, such as foxgloves, hollyhocks, grannies bonnets and forget-me-nots are very adept at setting their own seed and will pop up of their own accord if you let them - season after season.

You can sow annuals from seed (many interesting varieties are available by mail order), buy them as small seedling in punnets of six to ten, or as 'potted colour'. The latter are advanced seedlings already in flower, costing more per plant but with well-grown roots they resist transplanting shock and give instant pleasure. In early spring, when the ground is still cold and damp, and snails are still out in force, planting potted colour in containers is a good way to get a head start.

By growing annuals in pots, you can move them from view once they're passed their best, replanting when time allows. For high impact, (and easier watering) plant annuals in medium to large bowls or pots, rather than lots of little ones.

Flowering annuals to plant now include pansies, primula, polyanthus, Californian poppies, snapdragons, lobelia, alyssum, and cosmos. Once the soil warms up and the risk

of frost is over, plant petunias, nicotiana, marigolds, impatiens, sunflowers and phlox for summer flowering. Cornflowers, alyssum, sunflowers and sweet peas (in cooler climates) are ideally sown directly into the garden in spring. Feeding with balanced liquid fertiliser and removing faded blooms keeps flowers coming for longer.

The traditional herbaceous border - a wide garden bed filled to overflowing with flowering perennials - can be breathtakingly beautiful in spring and summer, but bare and lifeless in winter - not so good if your garden is only small. Today's flower borders combine herbaceous perennials with evergreen shrubs, flaxes and grasses and other foliage plants.

Low growing perennials are ideal for pots and garden edges, or as fillers around taller shrubs. For easy spring and summer colour consider arctotis, gazania (African daisies), Osteospermum (cape daisies), Cerastium tomentosum (snow in summer), Dianthus, prostrate phlox, Thyme, Colourwave petunias and verbenas.

Medium height favourites include the highly distinctive Euphorbias, whose bright chartreuse bracts mix well with other flowers, including roses. Euphorbias are lovely in partnership with crane's bill geraniums, which flower through spring and summer in shades of blue, purple and pink on attractive lacy foliage. Easy Nepeta (catmint) provides a purple blue haze for many months and comes in low or taller growth habits. The sweet chocolate fragrance of Heliotropium (cherry pie) is a must have in the summer garden. Hemerocallis (daylily) is well known as a low maintenance flowering perennial with flaxy foliage and continuous crops of flowers in a wide range of colours.

Free flowering Alstroemerias come in a fantastic array of bright colours with growth habits ranging from the old fashioned tall varieties (fantastic for picking) to compact dwarf cultivars perfect for pots. In between are mid height strains such as the 'Inca' alstroemerias fantastic for a pot or garden bed, and without the invasive problems of older varieties.

Dahlias, traditionally known as big blousy flowers on long stems, have undergone a transformation at the hand of New Zealand plant breeder Dr Keith Hammett. The new Hammett dahlias epitomise the ultimate modern garden perennial, fuss-free and compact with attractive dark foliage covered in masses of single flowers, and they don't require staking.

Also in the medium height range, and good for pots are Argyranthemum (Marguerite daisy) and pelargoniums (commonly known as geraniums). Zonal geraniums, the traditional summer pot plant grown all over Europe, will flower from October to February. Cascading and climbing 'ivy geraniums' are great for window boxes and hanging baskets. Though frost tender, pelargoniums grow quickly in warm well-drained conditions and are especially partial to pots, where they will bloom continuously throughout the summer season. They also make excellent coastal plants. Keep them tidy by trimming back stems as flowers fade, then cut back hard in autumn.

Taller perennials include Achillea, classic delphiniums, Echinacea, Echium, bearded iris, lilies, Penstemon, salvias and Sedum spectabile (stonecrop) a distinctive succulent with striking geometric form. Cannas, with their big bold leaves and bright flowers are very quick growing, forming expansive clumps in warm climates with plenty of moisture.

Roses peak in mid spring, and many of them continue blooming right through till mid autumn. Plant new roses before the weather gets too warm, or wait till next winter. The easiest roses to manage, especially in a smaller garden, are the disease resistant shrub roses such as Flower Carpet roses, which come in six different colours. Feed roses in spring with slow-release fertiliser and keep them well watered for the best ever blooms.

While roses sleep through the cooler months, its show time for camellias, magnolias, azaleas and daphnes, rhododendrons. Spring is a good time to plant these dependable flowering shrubs, which offer a wide range of colours and growth habits from ground hugging to very tall. Choose your varieties carefully and you can enjoy flowers in your garden 365 days of every year.