



Prior to sowing the demonstration bed at Hyde Hall (see pp54-55) the soil is raked level.



GAP / CHRISTINA BOLLEN

Garden practice SOWING annuals

Easy to grow and fast to flower, hardy annuals bring colour to summer gardens. A demonstration at RHS Garden Hyde Hall showed three ways to grow them

Authors: **Graham Rice**, freelance horticultural journalist, and **Julie Hollobone**, Editorial Projects Manager for *The Garden*. Photography: **Tim Sandall**

For many years, hardy annuals have been dismissed as being almost second class – inexpensive, easy flowers you gave to children to mess around with. Somehow they were not in the same class as hardy perennials or alpines.

This is a big mistake. True, they are usually inexpensive, but the amount of colour – for the garden or the vase – that can be grown from a packet of seed, costing a fraction of one small perennial plant, is terrific.

Definition and origins

A hardy annual is usually defined as a plant that germinates from seed and then grows, flowers, disperses its new seeds and dies all in the same year. So, we usually sow the seed in spring for the plants to flower in summer. By winter they have died and their seed is shed.

But it is important to remember that many of these plants originate in regions with Mediterranean climates, where they can behave rather differently. There, seed often germinates in autumn, when fresh rains arrive at the end of a hot, dry summer. Plants develop into rosettes of foliage or sturdy young plants, and they also produce strong, deep root systems. Then, in spring, as temperatures rise and clear skies predominate, the flowering stems that arise are supported by the already established, deep root system, which has access to moisture long after the

surface layer of soil has dried out.

Plants growing in this way are often termed 'winter annuals'. Replicating this natural cycle in gardens is the way to grow the most colourful and productive hardy annuals over the longest season. Many gardeners take this approach, successfully, with sweet peas – and it also pays to try it for other plants.

Using hardy annuals

By and large, the days of growing a whole border of hardy annuals have passed, partly because few gardeners now have the space to do this, and partly (of course) because for a significant part of the year the border would be remarkably colourless.

There are however a surprising number of ways in which hardy annuals can enhance the garden:
 ✦ **Create a bold impact:** a group of spring or autumn direct-sown annuals, or annuals overwintered in pots and planted in early spring, can provide colourful late-spring and early-summer impact before traditional perennials or summer bedding are at their peak.

✦ **Fill gaps in borders:** use hardy annuals to provide bursts of short-term colour among newly planted perennials or around shrubs, and with any plants that you expect to fill out and grow into the space in the longer term.

✦ **Keep displays interesting:** one intriguing consequence of growing >>

Graham's favourite hardy annuals

In addition to those that received the Award of Garden Merit (AGM) in the 2008 trial at RHS Garden Wisley (see p54), I recommend:

- 1 ***Centaurea cyanus* (cornflower)** Autumn sown, makes a prolific cut flower or border plant but will need support. Try *Centaurea cyanus* 'Black Ball', with deep purple flowers (pictured).
- 2 ***Glebionis segetum*** A fine autumn-sown cut flower or border plant (often sold as its synonym *Chrysanthemum segetum*). Try the primrose yellow cultivar 'Eastern Star' (pictured).
- 3 ***Cerinthe* (honeywort)** Tubular flowers in purplish tones, self seeds in gravel and can be cut. Try purplish blue *C. major* 'Purpurascens' (pictured).
- 4 ***Tropaeolum* (canary creeper and nasturtium)** Vigorous and easy climbers and clumpers. Dainty *T. peregrinum* (canary creeper), which has frilly yellow flowers, is ideal for growing through shrubs. The many bushy or climbing selections of *T. majus* (nasturtiums; pictured) have more impact but less grace.
- 5 ***Helianthus annuus* (sunflower)** Vast variety, single and double, huge and dwarf. Try *Helianthus annuus* 'Valentine' AGM; pale yellow with a black centre (pictured).
- 6 ***Nigella* (love-in-a-mist)** Always best sown in autumn. Try *Nigella damascena* 'Miss Jekyll' AGM which has sky-blue flowers (pictured).
- 7 ***Eschscholzia californica* (California poppy)** Many single colours now available as well as mixes; good in gravel. Try *E. californica* 'Appleblossom Pink' (pictured), a frilly pink double.
- 8 ***Lathyrus odoratus* (sweet pea)** Catalogues mark the most fragrant of these. Try *L. odoratus* 'Painted Lady'; pink and white with a heavy scent (pictured).

annuals is that you are forced to make a choice every year. Shall I grow the same ones again, or try something new? It is a good opportunity to make changes in gardens – you can repeat what you like and what works, and discard choices that work less well.

❖ **Grow flowers for cutting:** autumn-sown hardy annuals are among the best of all home-grown cut flowers as they are far more productive than those sown in spring.

❖ **Let annuals provide a theme:** for informal mixed borders, hardy annuals in white or another single colour can be allowed to self-sow and serve as a unifying colour theme.

❖ **Make use of climbers:** hardy annual climbers such as sweet peas, *Tropaeolum* and more tender *Rhodochiton* (purple bell vine) can bring summer colour to plants such as forsythias and weigelas, when grown through their (often unremarkable) summer foliage. ●

Getting the best from hardy annuals

Julie Hollobone outlines the three methods of growing demonstrated this year at RHS Garden Hyde Hall

Easy to grow and fast to flower, hardy annuals can be unrivalled for bringing summer colour to gardens. There are three methods of starting off this group of plants:

❖ **Sow direct in autumn.** Sown from this month on, many hardy annuals will survive winter as young plants. They flower in late spring, weeks earlier than spring-sown plants.

❖ **Grow as plug plants.** Overwinter seedlings in plugs or small pots in a cold glasshouse to protect them from the worst winter weather and variable soil conditions. Plant out as the weather warms and soil conditions improve.

❖ **Sow direct in spring.** The soil is moist and warm, so this method gives quick rewards, with the first flowers opening within weeks, at around midsummer.

These methods were demonstrated at RHS Garden Hyde Hall this year, with the first sowings made in September 2010. Andrew Hellman, Team Leader responsible for the demonstration, says, 'I was really impressed with the display, especially annual lavatera (*Lavatera trimestris* 'Ruby Regis'), which I intend to grow next year.'

Ground preparation

Hyde Hall has heavy clay soil, so to improve drainage a large raised bed was created in a sunny position. The soil was cultivated well, weeded, and green waste incorporated to improve structure. The soil was raked over several times to reduce the size of the soil crumb and form a suitable seed bed. Seeds were sown (and seedlings planted) in rows to highlight more clearly any differences, but you could grow them in drifts if you thin seedlings to 20cm (8in) apart when they reach about 8cm (3in) tall.



Sowing in September 2010



Thinning in spring



Centaurea in flower

Sowing direct in autumn

Plants grown: *Calendula* 'Princess Orange Black'; *Centaurea cyanus* Polka Dot Series, mixed; *Cerinthe major* 'Purpurascens'; *Lupinus mexicanus* Pixie Delight Group; *Papaver* 'Black Swan'; *Verbascum blattaria* 'White Blush'

When sown: Late September 2010, in rows 30cm (12in) apart, when typical temperatures were close to 15°C (59°F) by day and 8-10°C (46-50°F) at night.

Overview: In November and December day temperatures were below average, with several frosts, and snow fell in December. We covered seedlings with fleece to offer some protection, but calendula, verbascum and lupin failed. We thinned crowded seedlings to a final 20-30cm (8-12in) spacing in spring to encourage bushy growth.

First to flower: *Cerinthe*, in mid-April, 29 weeks after sowing. *Centaurea* and *Papaver* first flowered three weeks later.



Hardening-off autumn sown plugs



Planting out in April



Flowering plug plants in summer 2011

Growing in plugs or small pots

Plants grown: *Antirrhinum majus* Kim Series, mixed; *Consolida ajacis* 'Frosted Skies'; *Lavatera trimestris* 'Ruby Regis'; *Orlaya grandiflora*; *Rudbeckia hirta* 'Cherry Brandy'; *Salvia viridis* Bouquet Group

When sown: September 2010, into plug trays (individual 7½cm (3in) pots work just as well for home gardeners), and overwintered in an unheated glasshouse.

Overview: Trays were watered to keep the compost just moist in the coldest months. After a few days' hardening-off in a ventilated cold frame, we planted out seedlings in April at 30cm (12in) spacing. They were watered in, thoroughly, due to the dry soil conditions, and then regularly as required.

First to flower: *Orlaya* and *Salvia* in mid-May, just six weeks after planting, and *Lavatera* at eight weeks. *Rudbeckia* was the last to flower, 13 weeks after planting out.



Sowing in April



Weeding in early summer



Calendula in flower

Sowing direct in spring

Plants grown: *Calendula* 'Princess Orange Black'; *Centaurea cyanus* Polka Dot Series, mixed; *Cerinthe major* 'Purpurascens'; *Lupinus mexicanus* Pixie Delight Group; *Papaver* 'Black Swan'; *Verbascum blattaria* 'White Blush'

When sown: April 2011, in rows 30cm (12in) apart, in freshly raked soil. Due to a warm spring – average temperature in April was 17.6°C (63°F), more than 5°C (41°F) above typical values – and only 5mm (³⁄₁₆in) monthly rainfall, we watered the seed drill especially well prior to sowing.

Overview: Seedlings were thinned, weeded and irrigated regularly. Early growth was slow – germination of *Verbascum* failed again – but annual *Lupin* grew well.

First to flower: *Calendula*, *Cerinthe* and *Centaurea* in June, 10 weeks after sowing. Annual *Lupin* started to flower, though sparsely, within 11 weeks.

Autumn or spring? Hyde Hall's verdict on when to sow annuals



Andrew Hellman, Horticultural Team Leader at RHS Garden Hyde Hall (left), who oversaw the comparison of

the three different growing methods, comments on the performance of the plants:

'Due to the clay soil at Hyde Hall and the difficulty in creating a good seed bed, I expected the hardy annuals raised as plug plants to be most successful. They were spared the worst of the freezing temperatures and were quick to flower once planted. Our autumn sowing was less successful: an early onset of the coldest winter in recent years led to the less cold-tolerant selections failing, so use this method for the most vigorous of hardy annuals or in milder conditions. Our spring-sown plants did surprisingly well and gave a good return for the least work – although only six plants from three packets of verbascum seed is pretty poor.'



RHS Garden Hyde Hall uses hardy annuals such as *Eschscholzia* to great effect in the Dry Garden.



Award of Garden Merit

Following a trial of more than 150 spring-sown hardy annuals at RHS Garden Wisley in 2008, the following received the Award of Garden Merit (AGM).

- ❖ *Ammi majus* 'Graceland'
 - ❖ *Convolvulus minor* Panorama Group
 - ❖ *Coreopsis tinctoria* 'Mardi Gras'
 - ❖ *Echium vulgare* 'Blue Bedder'
 - ❖ *Linaria maroccana* Fairy Bouquet Group
 - ❖ *Orlaya grandiflora* (also sold as cultivar 'White Lace')
 - ❖ *Rhodanthe chlorocephala* subsp. *rosea* 'Pierrot'
- Many sweet pea (*Lathyrus*) selections also hold an AGM, including 'Charlie's Angel', 'Dawn Chorus', 'Pink Cupid' and 'Mrs Bernard Jones'.

www.rhs.org.uk For more from the 2008 trial enter 'Hardy annuals trial' in the search box at RHS Online. ❖ For more images from the demonstration of growing techniques at RHS Garden Hyde Hall visit 'September 2011' at: www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden