

ANNUALS, BIENNIALS, AND BEDDING

Indispensable in pots, containers and borders, many of these colourful plants flower from early summer to early autumn, and some also provide beautiful foliage. Combine them with plants that bloom in winter and spring to brighten up your garden all year round.

What are annuals and biennials?

Annuals are plants that grow, bloom, set seed and die in a single growing season. Biennials complete their lifecycle in two seasons: most are sown in late spring or summer and make leafy growth in the first year, then flower, set seed and die in the next. Bedding plants usually refer to half-hardy or tender annuals that are traditionally used in summer flower schemes. Some plants in this category are technically perennials or even shrubs, but are referred to as annuals because they are used for just one season. Examples include pelargoniums, nemesias, and brachyscome, which are perennials, and marguerites (*Argyranthemum* species), and fuchsias, which are tender shrubs. Plants in this group are also sometimes described as “summer seasonals” and “spring seasonals”.

BELOW Summer harmonies
Combine the shapes and colours of annuals for a balanced display. Begonias, heliotropes, silver-leaved senecio, and zinnias create a vibrant mix.



Growing annuals and biennials

Plants in this category can be grown from seed, bought as young seedlings known as “plug” plants, or purchased as mature specimens ready to plant. Sowing seed is the most cost-effective option if you have a large space or lots of containers to fill; there are many half hardy or frost-tender types that are very easy to grow in pots or trays on a windowsill or in a greenhouse, including petunias, French marigolds (*Tagetes*), and tobacco plants (*Nicotiana*). The seedlings should be hardened off for a few weeks in spring by placing them outside during the day and bringing them back under cover at night. Then plant them outside in late spring when all danger of frost has passed. Hardy annuals are easier still, as they can be sown outside in spring where they are to flower. For earlier summer blooms, plants like love-in-a-mist (*Nigella*) and poppies (*Papaver rhoeas*) can be sown in early autumn in free-draining soil. Sow your



ABOVE Shades of pink
Create an elegant basket using shades of pink. Dark cherry pink petunias, pale busy Lizzies, starry isotomas, and raspberry-coloured diascias combine beautifully.

seeds in straight lines or curves, so that you can distinguish them from weed seedlings when they germinate. For winter and spring colour, most suitable plants, such as violas, are raised from seed sown in summer. Alternatively buy young plants in the autumn. Biennials can be grown from seed or bought as plug plants in the summer before they bloom. Find a quiet corner of the garden to sow your seed as they will be there for many months, and may be swamped by other plants if sown directly into a summer bed or border.

Ornamental features

Annuals and biennials are available in a wide range of shapes and sizes, from low hummock-forming cultivars of *Ageratum houstonianum* and trailing petunias to the tall spires of foxgloves (*Digitalis purpurea*) and dramatic Scotch thistles (*Onopordum acanthium*) that shoot up to 1.8m (6ft). Flowers offer a vast choice of colours and forms, including scented types such as heliotropes (*Heliotropium arborescens*), tobacco plants (*Nicotiana* species), and the chocolate-scented *Cosmos atrosanguineus*. Colours extend from the opalescent whites of *Lavatera trimestris* ‘Mont Blanc’ to the vibrant scarlets of pelargoniums, bright orange and yellow Californian poppies (*Eschscholzia californica*) and intense magentas and purples of petunias. For more subtle pastel schemes, opt for plants such as *Anoda cristata*, blue *Silene*

coeli-rosa, baby blue eyes (*Nemophila menziesii*), and pale green blooms of *Nicotiana langsdorfii*. To provide a foil for the flowers, consider the wealth of foliage plants available. These include the vast variety of coleus (*Solenostemon*) with their multi-coloured leaves, the bright silver foliage of *Senecio cineraria*, and dark purple-lobed leaves of *Ipomoea batatas* ‘Blackie’.

Design options

Annuals and biennials provide an extended season of colour in formal schemes, and are particularly useful for filling beds and gaps in borders. In addition, they can be used to edge flower beds and borders or to create Victorian-style bedding schemes, which are enjoying renewed popularity. Hardy annuals like poppies, cornflowers (*Centaurea*), and California bluebell (*Phacelia campanularia*) are ideal for naturalistic or wildlife schemes. For mixed schemes, grow them in pots like half-hardy annuals or buy plug plants and set them between more permanent perennials and shrubs (many annual seeds will not germinate in these situations due to competition from neighbouring plants). Annuals and bedding plants make striking features in seasonal containers, window boxes, and hanging baskets. Use feature plants, such as fuchsias, zinnias, and begonias in the centre, together with trailers like *Helichrysum petiolatum* or trailing petunias to soften the edges of your pots. In autumn and winter displays,

POTTING UP PLUG PLANTS

If you do not have the space or time to sow seed, look out for seedlings, known as “plugs”. Many popular plants, including busy Lizzies, begonias, lobelias, and fuchsias are available in this form, with the largest choice available from mail-order specialists. Pot up small plug plants and grow them on indoors until the frosts have passed.



1 Remove plugs
Water the plugs as soon as they arrive. Fill large modular trays or 8cm (3in) pots with good quality potting compost designed for seedlings. Use the blunt end of a pencil or a dibber to gently push them out of their original containers from the bottom.



2 Plant up modules
Make a hole in the compost with your finger or the pencil and insert a plug into each module or pot. Firm the compost around the plants with your fingers, ensuring there are no air gaps, and taking care not to compact the soil or damage the roots.



3 Water the plants
Using a water can fitted with a fine rose, water the plugs well. Keep them in a cool, light, frost-free place, and keep them well watered. Harden the young plants off before planting them outside after the risk of frost has passed.

combine dwarf conifers, such as *Juniperus communis* ‘Compressa’, with dainty violas.

Year-round colour

The long flowering season of annuals and biennials provides months of colour. Violas flower in winter but put on their best show in spring, when they are joined by forget-me-nots (*Myosotis*) and wallflowers (*Erysimum cheiri*), which look particularly

beautiful when combined with bulbs such as daffodils and tulips. Follow these with any of the summer annuals and biennials, such as foxgloves (*Digitalis*). Busy lizzies (*Impatiens*) are particularly useful for shady sites. Autumn stars include Chinese asters (*Callistephus chinensis*) and in warm climes, the fruits of *Solanum pseudocapsicum* will brighten a winter's day. In cold areas, bring these bushy evergreens indoors.

SOWING SEED IN TRAYS

Growing summer bedding plants from seed can be very cost-effective, especially if you have several containers or beds to fill. Sowing seed in trays indoors is the ideal option for half-hardy or frost-tender plants, allowing you to start them off early in spring so that plants are mature



Pot of seed-sown annuals.



1 Fill seed trays
Using good quality seed compost, fill some clean seed trays to within 2cm (1in) of the top. Gently press another seed tray on top to level out and firm the surface. Water the compost with a can fitted with a fine rose and allow to drain.



2 Sow seeds
Pour some seeds into your hand and carefully space them out on the compost surface. Sprinkle sieved compost over the seeds, and cover to the depth specified on the seed packet. Also check the seeds' required germination temperature.



3 Cover and keep moist
Label the seed tray, and cover with a lid or a clear plastic bag. Place in a light spot. Keep the soil moist, and remove the lid or plastic bag as soon as the seedlings emerge. Harden them off before planting the seedlings outside.