

## What is an Annual?

The definition of a true annual is “a plant that germinates, flowers, sets seed, and dies within a single season.” Most gardeners use the term in a more general way, defining annuals as plants that grace the garden for a single season and are killed by frost in the fall.

Annuals are often classified by their ability to tolerate cold winter temperatures and early spring frosts, as follows:

- Tender (T)                      Annuals that cannot survive freezing temperatures. Most annuals are tender.
- Half-hardy (HH)              Plants and their seeds that will tolerate some cold but not hard frosts.
- Hardy (H)                        Annuals that begin growth in the spring from self-sown seed that survive the winter. There are also some perennials labeled as annuals because they are not winter hardy in the Kansas City area.

## Why Use Annuals?

Annuals are a favorite garden flower because:

- They have long-lasting blooms and bright, showy colors.
- They add warmth and cheerfulness to the landscape.
- They provide an opportunity to try new kinds of flowers and change the flowerbed color scheme each year.
- Bed preparation and weed control are easier.
- They offer immediate gratification when greenhouse-started plants are used.

What are their disadvantages?

- New plants must be purchased and planted each year.
- Flowering is delayed when sowing seed directly in the garden.
- Frequent deadheading of spent flower heads is required to ensure continuous bloom.

## **Designing with Annuals—The Ten Commandments**

In his book *Annuals for Every Purpose*, Larry Hodgson shares “The 10 Commandments of Annual Design” based on his years of successes and failures.

1. **Mix `em up!** Gone are the days when annuals had to be in a bed of their own. You can – and should—plant them among shrubs and perennials.
2. **Don’t plant too densely.** A newly planted garden always looks barren at first, but annuals will fill out in only a few weeks. Crowded plants rarely give good results.
3. **Plan before you plant.** It’s always wise to take a few minutes to make a sketch of a garden plan and then pencil in a few plant names.
4. **Use annuals abundantly for new gardens.** Even if you plan to have a garden that relies mostly on shrubs or perennials, use annuals until the permanent plants fill in.
5. **Avoid straight lines whenever possible.** Lines are hard to maintain. It takes only one dead plant to destroy the whole effect. Use curves and waves when planning edges and spots of color inside the garden.
6. **Repeat spots of color.** You can mix any colors you like with total freedom and abandon, as long as you repeat them.
7. **Stake discreetly or not at all.** If possible, grow plants that don’t require staking.
8. **Watch out for self-sowing annuals.** They have many good qualities, but that doesn’t mean you should let them grow anywhere they want!
9. **Don’t be afraid to experiment.** One of the great advantages of annuals is that they are temporary, so you can easily replace plants that don’t work with others when you replant next year.
10. **Don’t always follow the rules.** All rules are meant to be broken, especially in design. Break or bend a few – and watch your garden come alive!

## **Selecting Healthy Plants**

When choosing your plants, select ones that are compact, well-branched and without blooms! If you buy annuals already in bloom, pinch off the flowers and buds at planting time. This will encourage the growth of new roots and shoots.

As Larry Hodgson says in *Annuals for Every Purpose* . . .

“Blooming plants kept in cramped quarters all their lives are overmature... they are slow to produce new roots and tend to grow poorly or even die back. Slightly younger plants—perhaps in bud, but not yet in bloom—react differently. Put them in the garden and they immediately send out new roots in all directions, then new branches and leaves. Soon, they are larger, healthier, and more floriferous than the planted-when-blooming annuals will ever be.”

Always inspect plants for diseases and pests. Choose annuals that have healthy looking leaves with no leaf spots or stem cankers. Scorched or brown leaf edges indicate that the plants have dried out or been exposed to excessive heat. Check under the leaves for signs of pests. If possible, tip the plant out of its pot to inspect its root system. Healthy roots should be firm, white and not excessively crowded.

## **Caring for Annuals**

- Mulch**                      A 2 to 3-inch layer of mulch makes the bed more attractive, reduces weeds and conserves soil moisture. Organic mulches work best—such as bark chips, pine needles, shredded leaves or peat moss.
- Deadheading**            To maintain vigorous growth, remove the spent flowers and seed pods. Cut the flowering stem back into a healthy leaf. Most annuals will produce more blooms if they are deadheaded regularly.
- Watering**                    When you water, moisten the bed thoroughly. A soaker hose is an excellent choice for watering annual beds. Allow the soil to dry out between waterings.
- Fertilizing**                 When preparing annual beds in the spring, add fertilizer according to package directions. A soil test and analysis can help determine specific needs for your garden bed. Once annuals are established, fertilize on a regular basis. For annuals to bloom well, they need a constant supply of nitrogen.
- There are numerous types of fertilizers available. Always apply according to the package directions. Use fertilizer high in nitrogen. This is especially true if organic mulches are added because microorganisms decomposing the mulch take up available nitrogen.
- Weeding**                    Weeding not only keeps the bed more attractive but also eliminates possible hosts for insects and disease. It also allows the flowers to receive the full benefit of the available moisture and nutrients. Pull weeds by hand to protect the young roots of the annuals from being injured.
- Pests and diseases**        Because annuals grow only for one season, diseases are usually not a big problem. However, there are times when weather conditions are favorable for pest infestation or diseases. Before initiating control measures, determine what disease or pest is affecting the plant. Sometimes, it may be necessary to treat with an appropriate pesticide or fungicide, or to eradicate the specifically infected plants.

## **Adding Annuals to Your Garden Plan**

The glory of annuals is that they are temporary. There's no need to agonize over their placement the way we do with perennials, and if you ultimately decide you'd like to do something different with an area, there's always next year! Whether you have just moved to a new home that has a minimal landscape, or you have a new perennial garden that has not yet filled in, annuals can be just the ticket when you need a colorful but temporary solution.

Annuals play a complementary role to other plants. Use them to fill in spaces left by spring bulbs or early perennials that go dormant after blooming. They are also ideal for planting around slow-growing shrubs and perennials that will one day need lots of space.

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