HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

FALL BEDDING PLANTS

Yesterday marked the first day of fall and that means that it is time to add some fall color to your landscape. Because of the great climate in Central Florida, bedding plants can contribute color to a landscape all year round. Petunias, pansies, snapdragons, dianthus, and verbena are the ones that grow well under cool night temperatures and should be planted in the fall and winter. Some other bedding plants, such as wax begonias and salvias, grow well during both hot and cool seasons and can be planted all year round.

Before planting your bedding plants, it is important to correctly prepare your site. The sandy soils in Florida have very low nutrient and water holding capabilities. Two to three inches of organic matter, like compost or peat, thoroughly mixed into the soil will increase these capabilities, making better growing conditions for the plants.

The flowerbeds should also be fertilized before planting or at planting time with a 6-6-6 or similar complete fertilizer. Slow release fertilizers should be used. Bedding plants will usually remain healthier with a continuous nutrient supply. This type of fertilizer can be applied less frequently than liquid fertilizer, since it is released to the plants over time and is less likely to be completely leached out by heavy rains. Mix slow release fertilizer uniformly throughout the soil before planting and place it on the soil surface when plants are established. Follow the application amounts on the fertilizer label, making sure not to add more than the recommended dosage. Too much fertilizer can damage the tender bedding plants.

Before buying your bedding plants, measure and design the area to be planted, so you know just how many plants will be needed. It is best to limit the varieties of plants in the flowerbed to as few kinds as possible. Combinations of many colors and forms can distract from the overall appearance of the display. Using just one to three plant species can create attractive flowerbeds. It is also important to consider the amount of available sunlight there is in the area to be planted. Some plants perform better in full sun, while others prefer a more shaded area.

Since it is difficult for most homeowners to start bedding plants by seeds, most purchase them as large seedlings or young plants. Determining the quality of bedding plants during purchasing is important. Look for healthy, disease and insect free plants with dark green foliage. Plants that have been subjected to water stress, are tall and spindly, or have a nutrient deficiency should not be purchased, even if they are at a reduced price. Plants in this condition are not a bargain because they seldom recover to reach their full potential. Remember that it is not necessary for plants to be in bloom when purchased. Blooms are not necessary a sign of healthy plants.

Bedding plants purchased in plastic flats will usually have a pot-bound root system. Make sure to loosen and untangle the root systems of the plants, without breaking the soil ball, when planting them. This will allow them to become established in the surrounding soil faster.

Water the newly planted bedding plants immediately after planting and daily until they have become established. After that, they should be watered on an "as needed" basis. The frequency of irrigation will depend on the soil type, exposure to sunlight, daily temperatures, and the kind of bedding plants used. The plants should be watered by hand using a hose or with a micro-irrigation system where only the soil and root systems or the plants are wetted. An overhead sprinkler system can cause flowers to deteriorate more rapidly, rot, or become diseased.

Monitoring the bedding plants on a regular basis is important in reducing insect and disease problems. Infestations detected early can be easily controlled with spot treatments. Insects found on only a few plants can be controlled by picking them off or by applying a mild soap-based solution. If diseases are found early, they can be controlled by removing the infected leaves. For severe infestations, a chemical control may be needed. If you do not have an area to plant bedding plants in your landscape or have very poor soil, another approach is to grow them in pots.

Containers of bedding plants can add a splash of color to your porch, deck, or patio area. Plants grown in pots can be moved from one location to another. They also use less water and fertilizer and can be easily replaced if needed. For more information on Florida gardening, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your calls Monday thru Friday from 10am to 2pm.
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