Flowering annuals are one way of adding pizazz to a landscape. Variety selection and site preparation are important to get the most out of your investment. If you're heading to the garden center for a project this weekend, look for quality plants for color long into the hot summer months. Proper planting and care keep flowers colorful through the fall.

There are many annuals to choose from in seed catalogs and stores. In northern areas, the summer growing season is adequate for many flowering annuals to grow and bloom before frost, completing their life cycle in one year. While Florida's relatively mild climate allows us to grow plants year round, we have three growing seasons for annuals. Some prefer cool winter nights while others prefer the mild weather of spring or fall. Heavy rains, high night temperatures and high humidity limit summer plantings to the toughest species.

While petunias, geraniums and pansies may be on the shelves, they will be short lived in our summer heat. Instead, select plants which hold up in the summer heat and rain. For sunny areas, choose from Celosia, Exacum, Hollyhock, Impatiens, Kalanchoe, Marigold, Nicotiana, Ornamental Pepper, Pentas, Periwinkle, Portulaca, and Salvia. If you are limited to morning or afternoon sun in your planting area, select from Coleus, Crossandra, Exacum and Impatiens.

While growing plants from seeds is rewarding and seeds are inexpensive, large areas of color are often started from small nursery plants. When purchasing cell-pack plants, several individual plants in connected containers, look for plants which are small in comparison to the pot size. They can survive a few weeks in the nursery before becoming pot bound and stunted. Plants started in larger 4 or 8” pots have more available space for root growth. They survive better in the nursery for long periods of time until they are purchased and go to a good home.

Even though plants may be blooming while in sales displays, look at the roots for hints on survivability. Healthy roots are white, fine and hair-like. Roots should not extend from holes in the pot. Roots should fill the soil but not so tightly that they are packed in the pot. Tightly matted roots are difficult to establish in the landscape. When plants are well rooted, they quickly put new roots into the surrounding soil and grow and flower through the growing season.

When transplanting into containers, use clean sterile pots. When reusing pots, wash then with soapy water, rinse and then dip in a solution of 1 part bleach mixed with 9 parts of water. Let dry then fill with a light potting soil mix. Components such as perlite, chipped foam and sand add drainage and aeration, while peat is commonly used for its capacity to hold water. Many good soilless mixtures, those which contain no topsoil, are available. When the bags are unopened, they are generally clean and disease free.

Commercial potting mixes and compost are a good addition to landscape planters. They add water holding capacity to our well drained, sandy soils. Plant directly into a 6” layer of potting mix or compost or spread 4 - 6” thick and till or spade into the existing soil.

Add 2 lb of 6-6-6 fertilizer or ¾ lb of 16-4-8 per 100 square feet of planting area. Repeat applications are needed monthly during the growing season.

Space plants according to their mature size, usually 8 - 12” apart. Spacing too close encourages disease due to poor air circulation. Planting too far apart results in open spaces for weed seeds to grow. Gently loosen roots and plant seedlings at the same depth they were growing in the containers.
Water the small plants immediately after planting. Daily watering may be needed during the first week, then twice weekly thereafter, but frequency during the growing season will depend on the soil type. Check to be sure the original root ball is getting adequate moisture whenever you water. Early morning watering and avoidance of wetting the leaves reduces the possibility of disease.

As plants bloom, trim off old flowers to promote compact plants with continued blooms for a long season.

Proper soil preparation and selection of quality plants adapted to the season are keys to successful growth of flowering annuals. Now you know how to add a splash of color to your landscape.

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