

Bell County Master Gardeners
Tip of the Week
By Jann Dworksky
Zinnias—A Personal Favorite

Zinnias are a beautiful annual flower, very easy to grow from seed and with an interesting history. They are native to Mexico where they were erroneously named “mal de ojos,” which literally means sickness of the eyes. This certainly makes me wonder what some other flowers looked like if zinnias looked sick!

Zinnias were given the first written description in the 18th century by Dr. Johann Gottfried Zinn, a German medical professor. He also studied the eye and because of his work, a part of the eye is called the zonule of Zinn, or Zinn’s membrane.

Zinnias are personally my favorite flower and I have about 40 square feet planted in zinnias. They attract butterflies and hummingbirds and some of my best photographs of zinnias include these lovely insects. Zinnias require regular watering, but because of their striking colors and tolerance of the extreme Texas heat they will give you a superb display, even in a small space.

Zinnias should be planted outdoors in an area receiving 8 hours of direct sun. Dappled shade will produce weak, spindly plants that will do poorly. Many of the packages of zinnias say they may be started indoors 6 weeks before the last frost, but they are a heat loving plant and do poorly until the ground is warm. A two foot square planted in zinnias will add an eye catching boost of color to any flower or shrub bed. Water zinnias early in the day and avoid getting the leaves wet as they can develop a powdery mildew.

Zinnia elegans is the common zinnia and comes in a charming variety of sizes and colors. Thumbelina and Button Box grow from 6-12 inches tall and are very charming. They add a bright spot in your garden anywhere they are planted, but are not suitable for cutting. Lilliput zinnias are about 24 inches tall and have many blooms on each plant about the size of a quarter. These are excellent for cutting to make arrangements and like all zinnias, produce more blooms the more they are harvested.

The larger dahlia flowered (3-5 inches) zinnias have many smooth organized petals, while the cactus flowered have spiky petals that go in every direction. All three of these come in a variety of colors. Purple prince (zinnia elegans) produces beautiful medium purple flowers on plants 2 ½ feet tall and Green Envy is a lime green about the same height. Many varieties of zinnia seeds are available now in lawn, garden and grocery stores, and can be planted throughout the summer as late as August, resulting in a bright show of color for the fall and until the first frost. You can type zinnia into your search line on your computer, to see dozens of sites with full color photographs of these lovely plants.

Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com

Bell County master gardeners are taking applications for the next class starting January 2013. Applications can be downloaded from the website or picked up at the AgriLife Extension Office, 1605 North Main, Belton, Texas. [254-933-5305](tel:254-933-5305). The all-inclusive fee is \$250.

