

## Annuals for Central Texas

by Joyce Friels, Bell County Master Gardener

When the gardening magazines and seed catalogs started arriving in the mail in December, all of us could hardly wait for a chance to look at all the colorful flowers that were being offered. We made long lists of the plants we would like to see growing in our garden this coming summer. We especially marked new varieties of annuals and made plans of where we would sow the seeds. We could picture how they would look when they began to bloom. It was sooooo exciting! We were ready to start digging in the dirt as soon as the weather warmed up!

Well, it seems now, that winter is over (maybe) as the sun shines brightly each day and the ground seems to be warming up. The temperature is reaching seventy-five and eighty degrees during the day. The best sign that spring is here; all of the garden centers and nurseries have begun receiving bedding plants! You can't wait to scout out to see how many of the new varieties you can find for your garden. You have already received the new seeds that you ordered in January and are eager to sow them in your flower beds.

Whoa! Hold on! Don't put on your sun hat and gloves and head for the garden tools just yet! Mother Nature can be very deceiving in February and March. Most seed packets say to sow seeds after the last spring frost. That date can be anytime from the end of February through March here in Central Texas. Usually, in our area, the ground is starting to warm enough by the middle of March to germinate the seeds and the chances of a heavy frost are less.

Annuals could be put into three groups: spring/summer, fall/winter, and sun/shade. Spring/summer annuals fall into a large group of flowers from petunias to wax begonias. This group of annuals should last through the long summer season with some continuing into fall. Although some annuals stop blooming in our July and August heat, help keep them blooming by watering and feeding them on a regular basis through August. The fall/winter annuals include the pansies, dianthus and snapdragons to name a few. They like the cooler temperatures of fall and our mild winters. The sun/shade annuals will grow in both sun or shade, but most usually prefer morning sun with dappled or afternoon shade.

There are hundreds of varieties of annual flowers. Their colors are many, ranging the full scope of the color wheel. Whether looking through seed catalogs or reading annual flower seed packets at the local garden centers, you will be able to plan one or many flower beds. If the bed is along a fence or wall, sow the tallest flowering varieties in the back, coming forward with the next highest growing flowers and putting the lowest growing flowers along the edge of the bed to create a uniform border. If the bed is in the center of the yard, always plant the tallest growing flowers in the center of the bed with the next tallest then finishing with the shortest growing flowers around the outside of the bed.

Annuals can also be used as a screen by planting any tall variety of flowers along a fence to help block out street noise and give you some privacy. Plant morning glory seeds under a window. When you see the plants beginning to stick their heads up out of the dirt, place a stake behind each plant. On each stake tie a string and fasten the top of the string to the windowsill. Watch the plants vine around the support and bloom, bloom, bloom! They are fantastic to look at all summer long.

Living in Bell and surrounding counties puts us in hardiness Zone 8. Reading the recommended hardiness zone information on the seed packet will let you know if a particular annual will grow and bloom in our area of Zone 8. Annuals are flowers that grow, bloom, and die during one growing season. You will find that some, like zinnias, reseed themselves during the growing season. This means they will bloom, go to seed, drop seeds on the ground; then those seeds will develop and bloom so you can have a "rebloomin" crop of zinnias from summer to the first frost. When you keep cutting zinnias for bouquets, new buds will form, giving you continuous blooms.

Choosing to use annuals in your yard gives you many ways to add color and texture to your landscape. Annuals provide quick color for the garden. They are fast growing and relatively inexpensive. They will fill in a flowerbed by themselves. You can also intermingle annuals with

perennials for interesting colors and textures. Use annuals as splashes of color to fill in empty spots around or in front of shrubs. Color combinations are a personal choice. Also, annuals of a single color in a mass planting can be a knockout from a street view as you pass by. Whether you sow seeds in early spring or buy annual bedding plants from the garden center or nursery, be creative and experiment with color combinations to get different effects and to make your landscape outstanding.

Remember, in planning any flowerbed, put it down on paper first. List the annuals you want to use and plan where they should be placed. Plant them, water them, feed them regularly and watch them grow and bloom, making your landscape come alive this summer.