

## **The Weekend Gardener**

by Joyce Friels, Bell County Master Gardener

Have you always dreamed of being able to look out onto your yard and see a profusion of colorful flowers? However, does the idea of digging and maintaining a large flower bed discourage you from having your dream yard? You don't have enough time in your busy schedule? Well, let me introduce you to the idea of being a weekend gardener.

The key to having a successful flower garden is planning. What kinds of flowers do you like? When do they bloom? What color scheme would you like to look at? With these questions in mind, start looking through gardening magazines or get on the "the net" and look up gardening ideas. Get excited about being able to sit in your backyard or on your patio and enjoy the butterflies and hummingbirds perusing the tasty collection of yummy flowers!

Learn the difference between annuals and perennials. Study the flower heights in relation to each other in a flower bed and imagine how they will look. You can mix and match varieties and choose any combinations of colors you like. Learn about what varieties of flowers attract butterflies and hummingbirds. Visit the many nurseries in the area and ask questions about what flower varieties will grow well in your yard.

Even with the temperatures being in the nineties in August and early September, you can still plan a successful garden. Check the local nurseries as to when cooler season plants will be available. These selections, fall mums, snapdragons, and pansies can be planted in September and you should be able to enjoy the blooms well into the winter months.

Perennial plants that bloom in the spring are best planted in the fall from October through December, so they can get a good start before the "cold" weather comes to Central Texas. You might want to think about planting spring and summer blooming bulbs like hyacinths, daffodils, irises. They are best planted in November to give them a good start for blooming next spring or summer, depending on what varieties you choose. You should also familiarize yourself with the wide variety of native plants. They require minimum care once established. If you choose native plants, you can enjoy blooms almost all year round.

After you have collected all this information and your head is spinning with ideas, set down some ground rules. Be realistic about exactly how much time you can devote to your garden. Also, be realistic about your horticultural abilities. These set the stage for all other decisions you make about what best suits your situation. You must start with a carefully thought-out plan. Choose plants that are reliable and problem-free for your area. Arrange groups of plants together, spacing them closer than recommended. Close plantings hide dead foliage and weeds aren't as likely to sprout if there is less space between plants. Each plant should have a purpose. All it takes to have a flourishing garden is a combination of adjusted expectations, careful strategies and a selection of just the right plants.

Remember, you don't have to dig up a whole acre to have a beautiful area that you and your friends can enjoy. Decide on the size of the space you want to dedicate to growing flowers, starting out small. Dig up the area and prepare the soil well. Add compost and a slow release fertilizer. Rich, well-drained soil not only nourishes plants but also holds just the right amount of moisture to keep them in good growing order. Vigorous plants withstand drought, disease and even insect attacks better than struggling ones. Now, plant the plants that you got at the garden center. Water them in good and then take a break with another cup of coffee. A small flower bed can be completed in a weekend. After your break, place mulch loosely around each plant to a depth of about three inches. The mulch conserves moisture and reduces weeds. Once the plants start to grow and bloom, you can easily take care of them by devoting a couple hours each weekend to your creation. Pulling any weeds that pop up and watering the plants thoroughly and deeply will make you a proud and successful weekend gardener. So, get out there and make your dream come true!

Once the initial flower bed is established, it can be easily maintained with a minimum of attention.

Come next February, you can start thinking about what plants you want to see blooming in spring and summer. You will indeed find satisfaction in having a spectacular garden that you have created. A garden that can be enjoyed all year long is the result of making the decision to become a weekend gardener! Enjoy!