

Spring into spring with cool cool-season annuals



Springtime is here!! (Trust me.) If you are another crazy gardener, you are very eager to get your fingers dirty and to put something colorful into the garden. But what can we grow at this unsettled time of the year?

The answer is-- cold tolerant annuals whose seeds or seedling transplants will grow in cold soil and survive a light frost. In Saint Paul, there is still a 50% chance of frost on April 29. The chance of frost decreases to 10% by May 14. Some of the cool-season annuals may die out or languish when hot weather arrives, only to rejuvenate and bloom in the cooler fall time weather.

Purchasing plants. Always examine nursery plants carefully for signs of disease or insects. Roots should be whitish, not brown or black. Plants should be stocky, not stretched and lanky. Avoid buying plants in full bloom, as these will spend more energy in flowering than in establishing a robust root system. All-America Selections winners (AAS) are proven to perform well in most gardens.

Hardening plants. If they have been grown in a warm, comfy greenhouse, even cold tolerant plants may need a period of climate adjustment. Harden off all new plants by gradually exposing them to increasing periods of sunlight and wind. Start with a couple hours daily in a protected area in part shade. Be careful that the plants do not dry out. Bring them indoors at night. In about a week, they should be tough enough to grow well outdoors. After planting in the ground, if a severe frost threatens cover these plants with spun row covers or other light fabric. For all cool season annuals, fertilize lightly or use slow-release or organic fertilizers so as to not encourage lots of tender (and possibly frost sensitive) new growth too early in the season.

Cool-season annuals to consider:

Bells of Ireland have green, long blooming, bell-shaped flowers. Plant seeds in early spring. Excellent for dried arrangements. 24-36"

California poppies can be direct sown early in the season. They are frost tolerant and do well in cool climates. Yellow, white, cream, pink, rose, or gold flowers bloom all summer long. 6-8 inches.

Cornflower or Bachelor's button have flowers of true blue, deep rose, pink, purple, nearly black, red, or white. A good cut flower, attracting bees and butterflies. Tolerates drought. Direct sow outdoors. 12-36 inches. Another blue flower to sow early is the **Chinese forget-me-not** (*Cynoglossum amabile*). It flowers in mid-summer with masses of tiny blue flowers. 9-12 inches.

Larkspur (*Consolida ajacis*)--spikes of blue, pink, or white flowers resembling delphiniums. Sow seed directly. Easy to grow. Good for cut flowers. 12-48 inches.

Ornamental kale or cabbages have colorful white, lavender and green leaves. Plant in masses for visual impact or around taller plants. These plants can withstand temperatures down to 20 degrees F. 8-24 inches.

Pot marigolds or calendulas have daisy-like blooms of yellow, orange, or apricot. Plant seeds outdoors where they will bloom. Try 'Kablouna Mixed' for a delightful color range of orange, lemon, or apricot blooms with dark centers. Very cold tolerant. 12-24 inches.

Snapdragon is fairly frost tolerant after hardening off. Plants may be put out in early spring. Red, pink, purple, yellow, orange, white, and almost black colors are available. Dwarf, short, tall and trailing forms are available--6 inches to 4 feet. Have children press the sides of the flowers to open the "dragon mouth". Taller varieties make excellent cut flowers.

Sweet alyssum makes a beautiful border, ground cover, or container filler. It will bloom from spring until heavy frost in the fall with masses of tiny white, red, or purple flowers. The nectar attracts beneficial insects. White varieties are the most fragrant. 'Snow Crystals' and 'Snow Princess' stand up especially well to summer heat. 4-12 inches.

Sweet peas come in both dwarf and bush forms. The seed coat is very tough. Sprouting improves by soaking seeds overnight in warm water or by scratching the seed between 2 sheets of sandpaper. Try to choose varieties with a delightful fragrance, as some of the newer and brighter hybrids have lost some of their aromas. Nice cut flowers. Taller varieties will need a climbing support. Plant as soon as ground can be worked. White, pink, red, purple, and almost blue colors. 2-6 feet.

Violets, violas, Johnny jump-ups and pansies are very hardy. They can handle a light freeze and even a late spring snowstorm. Plant these as soon as you can get them into the ground and you will have instant color. Pansies provide a bunch of smiling faces looking back at you. These dwarf plants come in all colors of the rainbow and some varieties even have ruffles. Remove spent flowers to prolong the blooming. Some newer varieties are able to better tolerate summer heat. 3-12 inches.

Other flowers for early seed sowing include annual sunflower, globe amaranth, Love-in-a-mist (*Nigella damascens*), black-eyed susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*), mignonette, and rose mallow. Additional seedlings that tolerate cold include dusty miller, dracaena, pinks (*Dianthus chinensis*), stocks, cupflower (*Nierembergia hippomanica*), Cape daisy (*Osteospermum*), lobelia, and annual phlox (*Phlox drummondii*).

Don't forget to plant cold season herbs and vegetables at this time for your edible landscaping. These include parsley, cilantro, thyme, potatoes, lettuce, radish, peas, spinach, cabbage family crops, and kohlrabi. Have fun this spring!

Happy Gardening,

Joe Baltrukonis