Summer Annuals for Color

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This is always a tough time of the year when it comes to the transition between the winter annuals and planting the summer annuals. If you planted snapdragons last fall they are looking great right now. Other cool weather annuals that may be blooming well in your garden are sweet peas, larkspur, stocks, calendula, dianthus and petunias. It is hard to pull them and retire the plants to the compost pile when the winter annuals potentially have another 6 weeks of bloom left. The petunias and dianthus may even last until mid-June.

On the other hand it is a good time to plant zinnias. You can also plant begonias, pentas, caladium, and coleus in the shade. In the sun plant cosmos, moss roses, and purslane. You can even plant vincas, which are deer proof, if you use the Cora selection. If you don’t use Cora, wait to plant vinca until about June 1 or you will probably lose them to aerial phytophera, a fungal disease.

One option is to fit in the summer annuals into any gaps you have in the garden or containers. It is also a good idea to pull out that portion of the winter annuals that are in decline, stocks and calendula may be beyond their best bloom period.

Zinnias are my top choice for summer color. Area nurseries have the Dreamland selection as transplants for large flowers that grow to 2 ft. tall. The 3 inch blooms are well formed and available in many colors including red, yellow, lavender, white, pink, and orange. The nurseries also have mid and low growing options for containers and garden borders. Dreamland zinnias make good cut flowers because of the bloom quality but if you want longer stemmed cut flowers, consider planting California Giant or Cactus zinnias by seed.

Zinnia blooms are a favorite nectar source for butterflies and hummingbirds. The plants produce more blooms if you use them as cut flowers or dead-head spent blooms but if you allow them to go to seed, the seeds are sought after by lesser goldfinches, cardinals and other seed-eaters. The reseeded zinnias that germinate will keep your garden full of blooms all summer.

We describe the fibrous rooted begonias as a shade-requiring plant but they do pretty well in full sun if you plant them in April so they have time to prepare themselves before the summer heat. The begonias are available with Kelly green or maroon foliage. The leaves on both versions are shiny and make a good show on their own but you also can choose from among white, red and pink blooms. Begonias are surprisingly drought tolerant and signal you by a foliage color change when it is time to water. Begonias do very well in containers or in the garden. They will grow to 18 inches tall.

Pentas are another summer color plant that does very well in shade or partial sun. They provide clusters of red, pink, white or pink blooms all summer long. They are utilized by butterflies and hummingbirds for nectar. Pentas are available in several sizes but most grow to about 2 ft. tall. They perform equally well in containers or the garden.

Prepare the garden for a summer planting of blooming annuals by incorporating 2 inches of compost and one cup of slow-release lawn fertilizer over every 50 sq. ft. of bed. Use a potting mix in containers fertilized with enough Osmocote, hibiscus food or other slow release fertilizer especially for containers to cover about one third of the soil surface.