**Weekly Express-News Article**

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**Summer Color**

March is usually when we begin to plant the annual flowers for warm weather blooms.

Most annual flowers do best in raised beds in our area. Prepare your garden soil by incorporating 2 inches of compost into the top 6 inches of soil along with one cup of slow release lawn fertilizer per 20 square feet of bed. Most annuals are not xeriscape plants. They will require watering several times per week. Drip irrigation is the best option.

Zinnias are the mainstay for the summer garden. There are many selections to choose from and they can be planted by seed or transplants.

The Dreamland transplant is my favorite zinnia. The flowers are borne on sturdy plants that grow to about 18 inches tall and nearly as wide. The flowers are 3 to 4 inches in diameter and have a relatively round shape. Dreamland blooms in yellow, off-white, pink, lavender, and red. They make very good cut flowers. In fact, if you don’t harvest the blooms for the house, deadhead the spent flowers as soon as they begin to decline. The action disappoints the seed eating birds but helps the plant to keep producing new flowers rather than concentrating on seed production.

Dreamland will readily reseed but the flowers that result show the wide variation of the parentage of the Dreamland hybrid. The colors are not as intense and the blooms are not as uniform. The one good thing about the reseeded Dreamlands is that they are even more popular as a nectar source for the butterflies and hummingbirds.

Lilliput is a small zinnia (10 inches) that is available as a transplant. Among the seeds that are available are cactus and California Giants. Wild seed farms at Fredericksburg produces large quantity of zinnia seed in mixed or single colors for large plantings. Visit their website at “[www.wildseedfarms.com](http://www.wildseedfarms.com)”.

Plant all zinnias in full sun. Allow 1.5 to 2 feet apart plants for the large varieties. Grasshoppers will sometimes eat zinnias but the usual pest that ends a particular plants life is mildew. You may want to have 2 plantings of zinnias to fill the entire summer through Thanksgiving blooming season.

In my neighborhood deer do not usually eat zinnias.

Semperflorens begonias are another top color plant for the summer garden. We think of them as a shade plant but they survive most summers in good shape in the sun if they are planted early into well prepared soil.

Begonias do not provide cut flowers but grow to 10 inches tall if planted on one foot centers they provide a solid bed of color through their decorative foliage and small pink, white, or light red flowers. The foliage is shiny and thick with bronze or green coloring depending on the selection you choose.

Deer eat begonias and so do slugs and snails but they are more drought tolerant than zinnias. Protect them from slugs and snails with a bait labeled for the purpose. Begonias can survive mild winters to provide color for a second year.

In most regions of the country marigolds are a favorite summer flower. They are available at San Antonio nurseries in several selections and sizes as well, but I hesitate to use them because of their proclivity for spider mites. There is a much better chance of a long season of marigold blooms if they are planted in late July or August when temperatures begin their downward trend and spider mite reproduction is declining.

It may be worth planting marigolds despite the expectation of spider mites if you have a section of garden that is infested with nematodes. Planting marigolds very close together in such an area reduces nematode populations.

Cosmos planted by seed now will produce flowers beginning in April or May through Thanksgiving. Limit the fertilizer you provide to Cosmos. They will grow 4 or 5 feet tall in good soils and only 18 to 36 inches tall in less fertile soils. In fact, cosmos can be treated like a summer wildflower. Spread the seed over the same poor soils that grow spring wildflowers for a summer replacement.

Cosmos will reseed themselves to produce new plants all summer. Seed or transplants are available in pink, white, lavender, gold, and yellow. The gold and yellow are hardiest. Grow cosmos in full sun. They are a favorite butterfly plant.

For hanging baskets and low growing flowers consider purslane and moss rose for summer in full sun. They only grow to 6 inches tall and spread to cover 12 to 18 inches in diameter. Select from pink, white, yellow, orange, lavender, and bi-color blooms. One problem with moss roses and purslane is that the blooms only open in mid morning and close in early evening. Despite the short bloom period the plants are decorative the rest of the day because of the foliage. Moss rose has torpedo shaped fleshy leaves and purslane has mouse shaped succulent-like leaves. Both of these plants are water efficient. Grow them in full sun.

Coleus is a foliage plant to grow in the shade. The two most striking colors are light green and dark bronze. There are selections of every shade in between and many multicolor versions. Coleus is attacked by slugs and snails.

Caladiums grow from a bulb. Some caladium can tolerate full sun but most are shade plants. The leaves are variations of a triangular shape that grow on the end of thin stalks. Foliage varies from light green to maroon. Many different shades and bi-color versions are available.

Caladiums are sensitive to cool wet soils. To prevent rot they are best planted in May or later in the summer.