

## Spring Color Plants

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It is warm enough to plant early summer color plants.

In the shade consider pentas, begonias, and coleus. Pentas are available in red, pink, lavender, and white. The tiny flowers are produced in rounded clusters about 3 inches across to make an excellent show of color. They are also a favorite nectar source for hummingbirds and butterflies. They are available in full bloom at nurseries and stay in constant bloom from now until November. There are several selections that vary in height from 14 to 24 inches tall. Pentas are uniform, disciplined growers that serve equally well in borders, massed plantings or as specimens in containers.

Semperfloren begonias are available with clear green or red-green leaf colors and red or pink flowers. There are several selections but most are 8 inches tall and 8 inches in diameter. The plants do best in shade but if you get them planted and established early in the season (now!) they can tolerate considerable sun through the summer. Semperfloren begonias are quite drought tolerant. They let you know when they need water by turning pale. Use the semperfloren begonias in containers, as borders, and in massed plantings.

There is a new begonia on the market, the "Whopper". It has been designated a Texas Super Star by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension because of its attractiveness and adaptability to use in Texas landscapes. It has the same characteristics of the Semperfloren begonias in terms of leaf and bloom colors, but it is 3 times as large! It is already a dominant part of my landscape after just 2 years of availability.

The appeal of coleus comes from the color of its foliage, lots of variation of maroon, green and golden including patterns on the leaves. Some of the varieties grow to 3 feet tall and nearly as wide. A few of the varieties are disciplined growers and can be used as specimen plants or in a border but most do best as massed plantings or as background color. The larger selections can be laid down or broken by wind and in my experience, none would qualify as xeriscape plants.

In the sun use zinnias, cosmos, vinca, moss rose and purslane. Zinnias and cosmos can be planted by transplant or seed. Vinca is planted as a transplant.

Zinnias rate very high as a summer flower for the sun because, in addition to being very showy, in the garden, they are an excellent cut flower source and are one of the best nectar and seed sources for birds and butterflies. Dreamland is the zinnia variety most available in area nurseries as a transplant. It grows to about 16 inches tall with large rounded blooms in red, yellow, lavender, pink, white, and orange. Birds will eat the seeds that Dreamland produces and the seed they drop will germinate to produce new plants that are not as colorful or uniform as the transplants but are appreciated as a nectar source for hummingbirds and butterflies. California Giant and Cactus zinnias also make good cut flowers and nectar sources. Plant them by seed.

Cosmos are available in pink, lavender, white, gold and yellow blooms. Some transplants are available, but they are mostly planted by seed. The yellow and gold are the most vigorous and are often used in wildflower fields to provide color after the spring bloomers end their production. Cosmos will reseed all summer. They produce cut flowers and nectar for the butterflies.

Zinnias and cosmos are not favorites of the deer but vinca is one of the few plants that can be labeled deer-proof. Use the "Cora" selection to escape the fungal meltdown that plagued vinca in past years. They produce red, white, pink, and lavender blooms. Vinca are not used as cut flowers but they work in mass plantings, borders and in hanging baskets and other containers. Vinca are the most drought tolerant of the annual flowers used in the summer. They fit well into a xeriscape landscape.

Moss roses and purslane are low growing plants that also are drought tolerant and work well in containers in full sun.

Correction- In a previous column I recommended that the sugar water formula for hummingbird feeders include one-part sugar to five parts water by volume. That was an error, the best solution is made with 4 parts water and 1-part sugar.