

## Blooming Annuals for Summer

Here is information on several annual plants to consider using for color this summer.

The newest Texas Superstar is a plant that has been around awhile, but the Superstar team says we haven't given it as much attention as it deserves. It is "New Look" Celosia. Dr. Brent Pemberton of the team says it is the best celosia (cockscomb) on the market. It can be planted by seed or as a transplant now and bloom through the summer.

"New Look" celosia grows to 14 inches tall and forms a plant 12-14 inches in diameter. Its foliage is maroon colored but the flower plumes that rise above the foliage are red, making for a colorful, distinctive appearance. It can be used as a bedding plant and works as a cut flower. I like celosia in a container.

"New Look" celosia does best in full sun but will tolerate partial shade. The growing site should have well-drained soil and the plants need regular watering just like zinnias.

The "Whopper Begonia" was identified as a Texas Superstar several years ago. It has all the good characteristics of the semperfloren begonia, plus it is showier.

"Whoppers" are available as two leaf colors and 3 colors of blooms in each leaf type. The flowers stay in bloom throughout the summer. They also have an ability to grow in sun or shade. Begonias do best in sun if you get them planted early in the growing season because they don't grow much in mid-summer. The plants are also relatively drought tolerant and tell you when they need water by turning a bit off-color. Irrigate them within a few days and they will be back to normal. The begonias also have the ability to tolerate freezing temperatures and regrow in the spring. This year was an excellent example. Most begonias were completely flattened by the record cold in mid-November but amazingly are sprouting and even blooming already this spring.

In addition to the characteristics listed that they share with their smaller cousins, the Whoppers grow 3 times as tall and wide with larger leaves and blooms. Trim them back in late summer to ensure that the sail-like leaves and crisp stems aren't broken back in wind and heavy rains. Begonias grow well in beds or containers.

Pentas also do well in containers or beds. They supposedly will grow in the full sun, but I have much better results when they are used in the shade or at most in the morning sun. There are several different sized pentas on the market so note the label to make sure it is the size that meets your needs. I like the 18-inch varieties for beds and large containers like half whiskey barrels. The smaller selections work well in small containers.

Pentas are available in red, white, lavender and pink flowers. The lady-bug size blooms are produced in 3 to 6-inch clusters above the foliage. The plant does a great job of producing a new cluster to replace the existing bloom so there always seems to be flowers until Thanksgiving when the cold weather arrives.

In addition to being attractive the blooms are a favorite nectar source for hummingbirds and butterflies.

Another good source of nectar for butterflies is provided by cosmos. If you compare cosmos to penta, it is an undisciplined plant. It also requires full sun to bloom. My colleague Jerry Parsons and I recognize cosmos as a good replacement for wildflowers in late spring and summer. Spread the seed in areas where it reaches the soil and is in full sun and you can expect blooms until the cold weather arrives in late fall. Seed and transplants are available in many colors including pink, white and lavender but the golden and yellow versions have worked best for us. In addition to drought tolerant blooms for field plantings, cosmos can be used for cutting flowers.