



Tony Glover
Regional Extension Agent
News Release

Annuals and Drought

Question: I love having annual flower beds but I am concerned about water conservation. Can I continue to enjoy annual color beds without them being a water hog?

Answer: Yes you may. Now that you have permission I suppose you want to know how? There are so many choices and “new” plants available it is hard to know where to start but before I give you my drought tolerant plant list let me give you some basics about successfully growing annual flowers.

Choosing the right spot can go a long way towards success. In general annual flowers bloom best where they have lots of sun but in our climate even so called “full sun” plants benefit from some afternoon shade. If you have a spot that gets direct light for six to eight hours these “full sun” annuals will still bloom well and they will need less water to survive. Nevertheless, annual flower beds will need to be watered for a couple weeks in order to get them established but once established they are very drought tolerant if you choose the right plants. A soaker hose snaking through the flower bed is an excellent way to conserve water while avoiding the often detrimental practice of wetting the plant foliage. If we run into another extreme drought, a good soaking once every two weeks will be all that is needed to keeping them looking great.

Good soil preparation prior to planting and a light mulching after planting to help retain moisture is always a good practice. Well decomposed organic matter is the best thing you can add to the soil to help improve air exchange in a heavy soil and water retention in a lighter or sandier soil. Till in 2 to 3 inches of organic matter into the upper 6 inches of native soil. It may be a good idea to add about 5 pounds of lime per 100 square feet of bed area in order to bring the pH up just a little because the organic matter may acidify the soil somewhat.

Another important point that is often overlooked and can lead to drought stress later relates to plant spacing. Space plants far enough apart to allow for future growth. If you place plants too close to make the bed look full immediately the plants will start to crowd each other very quickly. This often leads to greater pest problems and greater competition for the limited moisture available within the soil. Most annual flowers can easily be spaced one foot apart and many trailing or running plants (such as wave petunias or lantana) could be spaced at 18 inches apart or more.

The most important thing you can do to avoid drought stressed plants is to choose the right plant. There are several great plants that I could mention but I will give you a few bullet proof plants to try. Annual periwinkle (vinca) is a 'tried and true' favorite for good reason. They are very colorful all summer long and stand up to even the worst drought with little supplemental watering after the first two weeks. Their only negative is they must be planted in a well drained soil because they are prone to root rot diseases. On the plus side the researchers are releasing newer cultivars with much better disease resistance. Some other old favorites include; blanket flower, dusty miller, amaranth, mealy cup sage, purslane, narrow leaf zinnia, purple heart, strawflower and gazania.

Here are some lesser known favorites of mine; Scaevola, heat tolerant petunias (ie: Wave or Surfinia), Cupheas (mexican heather and bat flower), Ruella (Mexican petunias) and Abutilon (flowering Maple). To get a larger list of commonly available drought tolerant plants visit <http://www.aces.edu/HannaCenter/documents/Droughttolerantplantlist.pdf>. If you want to research how annuals performed in Athens Georgia's huge plant trial, visit their website at: <http://ugatrial.hort.uga.edu>. The Georgia web site provides detailed performance information on hundreds of annual and perennial flowers.

For more about this topic please contact Tony Glover, Regional Extension Agent-Home Horticulture, Home Gardens and Home Pest Management at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email gloveta@auburn.edu.

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