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For most of us, our fall gardens and landscapes by this time of year are full of colorful pansies, ornamental cabbage and kale, and other winter annuals.... Most of us like I said. There are still a few of us around who like always have waited for one reason or another to establish our fall bedding plants. For those of you who are like me and have not yet “gotten around” to this little chore, take heart there is still plenty of time and I have noticed that selections at local garden centers are still good.

Bedding plants can be considered as either hardy or tender. Hardy annuals can tolerate cold weather and are planted in late summer, fall, or even early winter. We would commonly call these plants “winter annuals”. Some of the more common winter annuals include pansies and of course ornamental cabbage and kale just to name a couple of the more common winter annuals.

While we are on the subject of annuals, now is a good time to collect seeds from your favorite summer annuals. Collecting seed from summer annuals is certainly cheaper than buying all those seeds next year, and besides it’s a lot of fun to be able to collect seed and use them for next year’s crop. We home gardeners have done this with our favorite non hybrid vegetables for as long as we can remember; however, we often forget or simply don’t know that we can do the same thing with our favorite summer flowers. Cleome (what many gardeners refer to as “needle and thread”), zinnias, and brilliant orange cosmos (one of my personal favorites because of their dry weather hardiness and the fact their orange color when they begin to bloom reminds me that Auburn football is just around the corner) are very easy flowers from which you can collect seeds and plant next year.

Winter annuals are now showing up in many locations and may be purchased at local garden centers, nurseries, and other locations as well. Plants must be free from any insect or disease problems or they **SHOULD NOT** be purchased. They should also have a deep green (off color can indicate disease problems or plants that have been mistreated or underwatered. The plants should also be compact and well branched (tall spindly plants indicate that the plants have been grown with insufficient

light). Small healthy looking plants are usually your best bet, don't worry if the plant that you select is not currently in bloom.

Most plant containers have a small plastic insert that will show you what the plant looks like when it does come into bloom. It will also give you important information about taking care of your new plants. The required amount of sunlight, cold heartiness, plant spacing, and the mature size of the plant are all on the insert. Pay close attention to how much sunlight your plants need, for plants listed as "full sun" you will need to provide a minimum of 6-10 hours of sunlight each day. If the trays your plants come in does not contain at least one of the inserts, be sure to ask for one.

Success in growing bedding plants depends upon how well you prepare the soil. Most Alabama soils will need an application of organic matter such as compost, peat, or leaf mold. It is best to mix the organic matter with the soil well ahead of time instead of waiting until planting time; however, it is never too late to apply organic matter.

In the absence of a soil test, you can use a complete fertilizer such as 8-8-8 10-10-10, or 12-6-6 at a rate of one to two pounds per 100 square feet of bed. Many of us do not talk in terms of square feet; however, so 100 square feet is equal to an annual bed that measures ten feet by ten feet. There are also many liquid, water soluble, or slow release fertilizers available, and they will work fine if used according to labeled directions.

Your plants should be set out as soon as possible after they are purchased. Remove plants growing in flats or cell packs by carefully slicing downward at the edge of the cell. Be careful to lift out as much of the root system as possible with your plants, and never try to remove the plant from the cell by pulling the stem. It is also a good idea to cut, pinch, or disturb the bottom of the root ball to get the roots to grow out from the plant, rather than in circles as they did in while in the pot or cell. Also, do not forget the most important part.....water your plants thoroughly after planting. I also find it handy to water the plants while in their pot or cells to wet the root ball and potting media, if you plant a dry plant into damp soil water will have a tough time soaking into the clump of roots and soil.

Mulching helps keep the soil surface from crusting, helps prevent weed problems, and helps to conserve soil moisture. Also, mulching will help protect delicate roots from the cold winter weather. Pine straw, shredded bark, or other organic materials are excellent mulches.

Proper planting makes future maintenance easier but does not totally eliminate the work. Some plants tend to grow tall and spindly rather than full and compact. Pinching out the tips of young shoots forces the plants to

branch low and produces more blooms on short stocky stems. Most plants get tall as the season goes on; therefore, cut them back once this happens to enjoy a later bloom period. Another light fertilizer application along with some additional watering if we are in a dry period is also advisable after you cut back your winter annuals.

To maintain vigorous growth of your plants, remove mature flowers and any seed pods that may develop. Removing spent flowers forces the plant to put its energy into growing new blooms rather than storing its energy in seeds. Removing old blooms works for both winter annuals as well as summer annuals and is particularly effective for pansies. It also works great on the ageratums, marigolds, salvia, and zinnias that you will be planting next year.