

GROWING

COOL-SEASON *Annuals*

IN THE SUNNY SOUTH

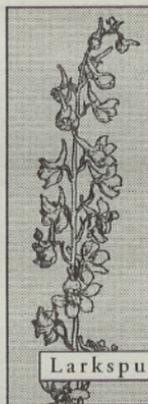
Tips, tricks, and suggestions for sustained bloom from flowers, such as poppies and larkspur, that thrive in cooler weather.

BY HILDA J. BRUCKER

LONG-FLOWERING ANNUALS ARE THE mainstay of southern gardens, putting on a brilliant show while the perennials around them come in and out of bloom. Seed catalogs offer a wide variety of annuals, but standard seed-packet instructions — “plant in a sunny place after the last frost date in spring” — are misleading for those who garden in the Southeast. Flowers such as poppies and larkspur are June beauties when planted in a New England spring. But below the Mason-Dixon line, the same plants, sown

at the same time, will scorch and burn in the heat of early summer before their show even begins. Is disappointment inevitable?

The answer is no. Southern gardeners *can* grow poppies and larkspur, once they learn to distinguish between “cool” annuals and “warm” annuals. Warm annuals include familiar plants, such as cosmos and impatiens. They germinate best in warm soil, thrive in heat, and succumb quickly to frost. Cool annuals



Annual Phlox



are different. Perhaps the most familiar example is pansies. We plant them in the fall, allow them to flower all winter and spring, and pull them out in April or May when they're languishing from heatstroke.

There are many other cool-loving annuals, though none that flower through the winter as prolifically as pansies. To ensure that cool annuals (such as poppies and larkspur) bloom before summer heat sets in, southerners must sow them in the fall.

SOWING DIRECTLY INTO THE GROUND

MANY COOL ANNUALS ARE FINICKY ABOUT BEING transplanted, so plant them directly where you want them to grow. Choose the site carefully. Full sun (six to eight hours during the short days of spring) is essential to tall annuals (three feet or more) to keep their stems from becoming spindly and flopping over. Whenever possible, avoid sloping ground — tiny seeds may be washed away completely.

Some gardeners claim they do nothing more than stand on a path and throw handfuls of seeds into the garden. However, for most of us, good soil preparation will help. Begin by removing all mulch. Cultivate the soil to a depth of at least three inches, being mindful of any roots of perennials or shrubs.

Break up all the large clods, and rake the surface of the soil smooth.

Seed packets generally provide good recommendations about planting depth. A general rule of thumb is to plant at a depth of twice the diameter of the seed. Large seeds, such as those for calendulas and sweet peas, are easy to work with and easy to space. Fine, dust-like seeds, as well as those that require light to germinate, should be scattered on top



Bachelor's Button



Opium Poppy

USING A COLD FRAME

■ If you have a cold frame, you may be able to start seedlings in December or January. Sow poppies, larkspurs, and love-in-a-mist in individual peat pots so they can be transplanted in February or March without disturbing the roots. Sow calendulas, sweet alyssum, and bachelor's buttons in small plastic pots — they transplant easily. Use a thermometer to monitor daytime temperatures in the cold frame, and prop open the top when it registers more than 70° F.

FIVE IDEAL SPOTS FOR COOL ANNUALS

■ Sow low-growers such as sweet alyssum or annual phlox over beds of late tulips to make a flowering carpet surrounding the bulbs.

■ Use cool annuals under and between rosebushes. Blue flowers (baby-blue-eyes, bachelor's button) will complement pink, red, yellow, and apricot roses during their first flush of bloom. The underplanting will also camouflage the shrub's twiggy base.

■ In fall or late winter, sow drifts of taller cool annuals between spring perennials. The annuals will grow and bloom while perennials are leafing out in the spring, and will disguise them as they begin to die back.

■ Plant sweet peas at the base of a fence, mailbox, or lamp post.

■ Pull out the summer annuals at the end of the season to make room for seeds of cool annuals.

of well-watered soil and tamped down lightly. To sow tiny seeds, such as those for poppies and alyssum, more uniformly, mix them with a cupful of sand. Remember, if you sow them too thickly, you will have to thin out the seedlings for them to be spaced about six inches apart.

When to sow cool annuals is a subject of great debate among gardeners. Well-known southern plantswoman Elizabeth Lawrence wrote that late September is best. Others say that the soil is still too warm in September and recommend October. What's the best thing to do? Find a gardener in your area who successfully raises from seeds the flowers that you'd like to grow, and sow according to his or her schedule. Your county's Cooperative Extension office can put you in touch with a local master gardener.

Experiment. Sow seeds in succession, two to four weeks apart. Keep records of your results. Seed packets are inexpensive enough that you can afford a few failures. Some seedlings will emerge in the fall, and others will germinate around February. During extreme cold spells over the winter, cover seedlings with a light mulch to give them extra protection.

When your annuals have finished blooming, pull them out. However, leave a few stalks of each variety to set seed for next year's crop. Label seeds and store them in a cool, dry place.

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Calendula



Sweet Pea

FAVORITE

Cool Annuals

OPIUM POPPY

(*Papaver somniferum*)

■ Spectacular, three-foot stems with flowers ranging from white to pink and red. Double-flowered forms are known as peony poppies. Needs light to germinate. For a wildflower meadow look, sow a packet of mixed colors with a packet of tall blue larkspur. Will self-sow. Seed pods useful for dried arrangements. Seeds can be used for culinary purposes.

SHIRLEY POPPY

(*Papaver rhoeas*)

■ A shorter poppy, 18 to 24 inches. Makes a good underplanting for roses and around foxgloves. Single and double blooms in antique shades of dusty rose, lilac, apricot, and creamy white. Needs light to germinate.

SWEET ALYSSUM

(*Lobularia maritima*)

■ A favorite edging plant; looks best weeping over the edge of a pot or a stone wall. Nearly as frost-tolerant as pansies. Cut back in mid-June for a repeat bloom in the fall.

LOVE-IN-A-MIST

(*Nigella damascena*)

■ A traditional English cottage garden plant. Grows two to three feet. Feathery foliage creates a mist-like effect and is

so light that it can be scattered all over perennial beds. Doesn't transplant easily. Sow directly. Colors range from pink to lavender and blue; available as separate colors as well as a mix. Ornamental seed pods are used in dried arrangements. If pods remain on plants, they will self-seed.



ANNUAL PHLOX

(*Phlox drummondii*)

■ Very compact bedding plants at just 8 to 16 inches tall. Great for underplanting roses. Can be sown in peat pots or directly in the soil. Remove old flowers to extend bloom.

BABY BLUE EYES

(*Nemophila menziesii*)

■ Gentian blue flowers on a trailing plant. Good for edging a bed or wall and as an overplanting for daffodils. A little-seen annual that could be more widely used; available through seed catalogs. Sow seeds directly in the ground.

SWEET PEA

(*Lathyrus odoratus*)

■ An old-fashioned vine with a wide variety of available colors. Climbs with tendrils, so needs something to grasp. Heirloom varieties are scented; modern hybrids are not. Intolerant of heat and humidity.

LARKSPUR

(*Consolida ambigua*)

■ Tall spires (one to four feet) of blue or pink flowers. The blue shades are lovely sown with pink or red poppies. Temperamental about transplanting and needs direct sun. Likely to self-sow if allowed to go to seed.

BACHELOR'S BUTTON

(*Centaurea cyanus*)

■ Known as cornflower in the Midwest. Most commonly blue, but pink shades are available. Eighteen- to 24-inch plants are likely to self-sow if allowed to go to seed.

CALENDULA

(*Calendula officinalis*)

■ An early-blooming marigold look-alike, also known as pot marigold, in shades of apricot, yellow, russet, and orange. Grows one to two feet. Seeds are large and easy to work with. Willingly self-seeds. Many herbal uses.

