

What is the point in planting annual flowers? Unbelievably, every year, I am asked that question. Years ago, as an inexperienced gardener, I probably asked the same question. After all, why would anyone want to spend all that time and energy growing something that dies in a year? Growing annuals can involve a lot of time and energy. Furthermore, some view it as a waste of valuable resources and, particularly, a waste of money. Having learned more about the nature of gardening and plants through the years, I have formulated what I hope to be a convincing solution to that question. Perhaps, after reading this column, those die-hard perennial flower growers just might consider growing some annual flowers.

Think about this for a moment. Most of our favorite vegetable crops are grown as annual plants. Why then the negative attitude toward growing annual flowers? This situation reminds me of a conversation I used to have with my dear friend Mick Ross, who sadly is no longer with us. He used to say to me, “If you can’t eat it, why grow it?” Perennial growers might say, “If I have to replant an annual flower every year, why grow it?” I could plainly see how edible annual vegetable plants held a higher esteem with Mick than annual flowering plants. I could have countered him and said that some annual flowers such as nasturtium and pansies are edible, but such a response would not have been that convincing.

The underlying concern to this conundrum is, “Why grow flowers in the first place?” I am reasonably convinced that most people grow flowers for their beauty and charm. Flowers provide an aesthetically pleasing value to the landscape and to our lives. Since both perennial flowers and annual flowers provide these attributes, I choose to grow both. Let us compare. Although both have common similarities, they do have their differences.

Perennials flowers, once planted and established, do not have to be replanted every year, as annual flowers require. Furthermore, once established, most perennials can be divided occasionally to produce more plants. Perennials have two major negative features. They are waiting for the flowers and experiencing a short bloom period.

Waiting for perennial flowers to regrow each season and finally start blooming takes time. Sadly, not only do perennial flowers take a long time to bloom, but also their bloom period lasts only for a week or two. Then, they are finished for

the balance of the season. After that, many become what I call “ho-hum” plants. Once perennials finish blooming, a **few** can be cut back and will re-bloom, but it takes again more time for new blossoms to re-appear, and often they are less attractive than the first.

The good news with annuals is the waiting is greatly reduced. Because annual flowers must complete their life cycles in a single year, they generally grow more quickly than perennials and start to bloom sooner. Once finished blooming, annual flowers can easily be coaxed to continue blooming throughout the entire growing season by a simple process called deadheading— pinching off spent flowers. Deadheading prevents the plant from going to seed and promotes the production of new flowers. Fortunately, some annual flowers such as vinca, impatiens, begonia and calibrachoa continue to bloom all season long without deadheading. Annual flowers can provide a constant source of cut flowers throughout the growing season. They can fill areas in the flower border where other plants such as perennials have died back, leaving a glaring gap. Furthermore, since the goal of annual flowering plants is to grow, bloom and produce seed, many, if left to mature, will produce seed for the following season.

Annual flowers are an excellent tool for helping children understand the life cycle of plants. Observing annuals as they grow from seed to beautiful flowering plants and then back to seed is a natural way to illustrate the topics of life, reproduction and death. I think the best attribute of annual flowers is how they pair well with perennials and how they create harmony in the garden. In the wild, Nature doesn't draw a line in the sand separating perennials from annuals, so why should we in our home landscapes?

This year, I urge you to try annual flowers. I am convinced you will be delighted that you did.