

Annuals – and containers

My son-in-law likes color. Lots of color, lots of bloom straight through the summer. He has no interest in perennials with their defined and much shorter season of bloom.

He loves petunias that now come in a whole range of colors, pale to deep shades, even bi-colored. Some are low and spready, perfect for the front of the border. Newer varieties like Purple Wave and Trailing White are graceful and great for containers. I have a special soft spot in my heart for petunias because I remember those hot summer days at my grandmother's house when I would be sent out to deadhead the petunias, but would spend much more time picking the flower heads and sucking out the sweet nectar.

Of course, petunias are just the beginning. There are dozens of other colorful annuals, some old favorites, some new varieties of old favorites, and some I never heard of. Recently I stopped by Blue Meadow Farm in Montague, one of the local nurseries that has a wonderful selection of annuals, as well as perennials, ferns and grasses.

Pelargoniums, the flowers we call geraniums, are a wonderful summer flower and Blue Meadow has no less than 34 varieties. We are all familiar with zonal geraniums with their patterned green and reddish leaves. Wonderfully colored foliage figures prominently in some of the new varieties. Bronze Beauty has chartreuse leaves ringed in bronze; the flowers are pale pink with a deeper blush. A much larger plant, growing to two feet is Crystal Palace Gem with clear yellow leaves splashed with green. The flowers are bright magenta.

Some geraniums don't have easy names, but have useful and beautiful attributes. Multicaule ssp. multicaule has lacy trailing stems and magenta flowers making it wonderful for hanging baskets.

People often think of begonias as houseplants, but many begonias are happy outdoors, in and out of containers. Fibrous rooted begonias are very easy to grow and when potted prefer relatively shallow containers. Some are familiar to houseplant lovers as angel wing begonias, like Corallina de Lucerna which has silver polka dots on the leaves and pink flowers on a plant 18 inches. Lois Burks only grows to 12 inches but it is wonderful for hanging pots with its salmon flowers.

Blue Meadow Farms has a large selection of various types of begonias which are proving so fashionable and desirable. There are Rex begonias known for their majestic foliage and rhizomatous hybrids which are also easy to grow with leaves in a whole palette of green, speckled with black or wine, with hairy stems or stems resembling rhubarb. Some like Kifujin are very compact at 6 inches and some like Earl-Ee-Bee grow to two feet.

Coleus has always been desirable for its colorful foliage and its pleasure in a shady spot. The excitement in coleus is that now some of them are also happy in a sunny location. Shades of red, wine and claret are expected, but there are also leaves described as khaki or chartreuse. The coleus plants get some of the best catalog descriptions. Inky Pink is described as qqGorgeous dusty salmon-rose with mossy, chocolate overlay,qq while Jungle Love has qqtorrid heart-shaped olive leaves delicately edged and speckled in burgundy with a bright cherry central stem.qq Wow!

Visits to a nursery open up a whole world of possibilities. Along with varieties of dependable cosmos, snapdragons or zinnias where you know what to expect you'll find Curcuma or Queen Lily, Cuphea, Diascia, Haloragis, and Oxypetalum caerulea, a type of milkweed with turquoise flowers that are really more happily seen than read about.

Blue Meadow also sells containers and hanging baskets packed with wonderful combinations of plants, varied colors of foliage and flower and contrasts in form and texture. If the planted baskets are too pricey, you can assemble your own container collection. The staff can be a big help in creating an interesting container bouquet. They will also give reminders about which plants need sun and which need shade.

Though tempted by the coleus, I remembered the sunny orientation of the front of my house and picked a more traditional collection of blue flowered plants, salvia patens which will send up a three foot gentian blue spire, Laurentia axillaries Blue Stars with fine deeply toothed leaves to provide mid-height interest, then my favorite blue lobelia and a little trailing white bacopa to put in a pot next to my blue door.

I've also planted sweetly scented stocks in separate pots and in a window box with more lobelia.

I was reminded that my container should contain a soilless mix, not garden soil which will be too heavy to allow the plants to thrive. Some people add a little well-finished compost to the soil mix. The secret of a long season of bloom is proper watering and fertilizing. Keep potted plants watered well.

Fertilizers specially designed for blooming plants are readily available. You will recognize them by the high numbers in the middle of the formula indicating high levels of potassium and phosphorus. Follow the fertilizer directions. Some people prefer to fertilize twice as often with half strength mixtures and this seems to work well, too.

Whether you put colorful annuals in the flower garden or in potted arrangements on the deck or patio, they will give you a summer-full of carefree color and pleasure. ###