

HOME & GARDEN

Cutting garden can fill home vases

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A flower garden can be very beautiful, exquisitely planned and maintained and an important part of the landscaping around the house. While I am filled with admiration for the very few gardens of this type that I have seen, it is not something that I feel up to duplicating. At least not right now, when I have so little spare time and when my knowledge of the cultural needs of many flowers and their periods of bloom is so sketchy.

Still, I do like to grow a few flowers. Mine is mainly a vegetable garden, but I love a vaseful of bright colored blooms on the dining table. Fortunately, it is not necessary to have an exquisitely planned garden to provide flowers for the house. All that is needed is a "cutting garden."

In a cutting garden you do not need to be concerned with whether the asters will clash with the pinks or whether a group of flowers can stand being cut without leaving an ugly bare spot. Flowers in the cutting garden are not intended to be admired "in situ" but on the table or mantle or bedroom dresser. That makes planning easier on the gardener, and the advantage to the flower is that the correct amounts of water, sun and air can be provided in more ideal conditions.

I spoke with Elsa Bakalar who is famous in Heath for her own garden and for other gardens that she has planned and planted. In addition to her perennial borders, Elsa says she always maintains a cutting garden so that she can bring flowers into the house without spoiling the appearance of the border. She gave me some advice about annuals that can be planted in rows in the vegetable garden or any out-of-the-way spot where you have space.

Baby's breath is often used in flower arrangements, and it is effective whether fresh or dried. There is an annual gypsophila called Angel's Breath, and the Covent Gardens variety is beautiful and delicate. It should be planted thickly and when it blooms it is possible to cut it down and it will come back again.

Asters make a lovely and versatile cut flower. They will last a long time in the house and come

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in many different colors including blue, white, peach, rose, crimson and purple.

Bachelor's Buttons resemble some of the asters, but they only come in a delightful shade of blue. They should be planted very early in the spring, it is even possible to plant them in a prepared bed in the fall. They will not do well if planted when the weather is too warm.

Poppies are another flower that must be planted very early in the season. I am not talking about perennial poppies (and certainly not the opium poppy) but about Iceland, California and Shirley poppies. All these must be planted where they are to grow (they do not transplant successfully), and although they are usually sold as annuals you may find that they will self-sow and come back again and again without replanting.

Poppies will bloom throughout the summer and come in several colors. The seeds are usually sold in mixtures of white, pink, red, yellow and apricot. Elsa told me that the trick to successfully using the California poppy as a cut flower is to bring matches and a pail of water to the garden when you go to pick them. The stem must be seared with a flame instantly and then plunged into water to prevent it from bleeding and the fragile bloom from wilting.

Say salvia and most people instantly think of spikes of a violent scarlet. It has never been one of my favorites, but happily salvia also comes in white (White Fire) and an intense rich purple (Purple Royal).

Last year while working at the Heath Fair I got to admire many kinds of cosmos. They are very easy to grow and depending on variety will produce single blossoms that are anywhere from 2 to 6 inches across. They come in yellow, orange and red, looking like a Mexican fiesta, but they also come in ladylike pinks and white.

Larkspur is an annual delphinium. It should be planted early when the soil is cool. April is a good time. It is my hope that sometime in April the snow will melt, and I will be able to find my

soil. The spikes reach 4 or 5 feet and are covered with blooms in blue, white and shades of pink. They can be the basis of some very striking arrangements.

Perennial candytuft is a low plant often used for edging, and its tiny white flowers make a thick carpet. There is also an annual candytuft with flowers in red and pink as well as white. They have slightly longer stems and make very attractive small bouquets.

Blanket flowers (gallardia) are striking plants that usually produce plants with petals of lemon yellow and raspberry red. They need lots of sun and love the heat of summer.

Elsa hesitated and then said she also recommended gazanias for the cutting garden. She hesitated because they are easy to grow and yet are not very common. Because they are so unusual she often wins prizes with them when she enters them in the fair. The flower is large and daisy-like, but each one "can have as many as four or five sharply defined colors." They come in bright shades of yellow and orange and brick red, but if you look closely you will also see subtle shading and even green polka dots near the center. It is an extraordinary flower.

Dusty Miller is a good plant to grow because its silver gray foliage makes it such an attractive foil for the flowers. Coleus with its interestingly colored leaves and some of the caladiums can also be grown for their foliage and used with different flowers.

Any healthy plant needs a healthy soil. Prepare the flower beds well. Dig in peat moss if necessary, as well as some rotted manure and compost. When planting fine seeds, I have prepared the bed, made a tiny furrow, planted my seeds (spaced according to the directions on the seed packet) and then sprinkled jiffy-mix on top of them instead of soil. This seems to get them off to a quick and easy start.

These are only a few of the annuals that can be grown easily in a cutting garden. I haven't discussed phlox, pinks, cleome, sweet williams or even my favorite zinnias. You need only be limited by your own taste and space—the possibilities are endless. Your house will be more beautiful for it.

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