

MAKE YOUR BEDDING PLANTS LAST LONGER

prepared by Joe Garofalo

Bedding plants (annuals, plus biennials and perennials used as annuals) are an important part of landscapes in South Florida. They can provide changing color and texture through the year, and are an easy and inexpensive way to perk up a dull landscape. Flowering annuals, however, also can be a major drain on the landscape budget if they're badly managed. Poorly maintained, weedy flower beds make the designer, the landscape maintenance professional, and the client look bad. Good design and maintenance help everyone get the most for the time and money invested.

The following discussion is divided into two parts: **design features** which should be kept in mind before anything is planted, and **maintenance operations**, which begin after everything is planted.

DESIGN FEATURES.

The following are design suggestions which can help you to get the most for your money and effort, using annuals to color up the landscape and provide seasonal changes.

1. **THE RIGHT PLANT IN THE RIGHT PLACE.** Rather than trying to change the site to suit the plant, choose plants that work well in the environment you have. Plant sun-lovers in the sun and shade-lovers in the shade. Some plants can adapt to various conditions, while others are particular in their requirements. Remember pH, fertilizer, and water requirements. Only use flowers that you know will grow well in your site. Keep shade, sun, soil, salt spray, temperature, and other factors in mind.

2. **GIVE THEM HEAD-ROOM.** Select bedding plants based on the desired height at maturity.

Pruning back tall plants adds costs, and delays or eliminates the desired effect. Trying to keep a 4-foot Cosmos or 5-foot Sunflower growing beneath a three-foot window frustrates the plant and the gardener. That applies to shrubs and trees, too.

3. **GIVE THEM ELBOW-ROOM.** Do not crowd plant beds with too many individuals in a limited space. This increases problems & the need for pruning. Know how big they will get & give them room to roam. Plants that are set too close (i.e., for instantly mature beds) soon become overcrowded. Overcrowding increases disease potential, reduces flower production, & can result in decline of the plants. Those customers who insist on instantly mature beds should be warned that plants will need to be thinned later.

4. **TIME & TEMPERATURE.** We lose a lot of annuals locally because of temperature. Many gardeners do not seem to understand that there are some annuals that can't take our Summers, and others that can't take our Winters.

We have complete control over this. Snapdragons and pansies, for instance, are fine Winter annuals for us, but they perform poorly in Summer, and will simply die out as the weather warms up. On the other hand, vinca (*Catharanthus*) and marigolds love the heat and do their best if planted in the warm season.

5. Pick annuals that drop spent petals or flowers easily to reduce maintenance. Such annuals are said to be "SELF-CLEANING" in the flower breeding business. Begonias, impatiens, and vinca are good examples of self-cleaning plants. Avoid or keep to a minimum those annuals

like geranium, most marigolds, salvia, and snapdragons which have to be dead-headed to keep them looking clean.

6. **CONSIDER** plants with interesting foliage. Try dusty miller, coleus, caladiums, and other colorful plants combined with flowering plants. Or try them alone. They are nice, neat plants in their own right, and they require less maintenance.

7. **PREPARE THE BEDS WELL** by working in organic matter, and by deep tilling (unless, of course, you're on rock). Organic matter improves root penetration into the soil, reduces compaction, holds water, and provides a slow release source of some nutrients.

8. **MULCH**, but avoid over-mulching. Three inches of mulch is about right for trees and shrubs, but a bit heavy for bedding plants. Use about one inch of mulch to cover the soil, control weeds, and conserve water. Once the bedding plants grow together most weeds are eliminated. Organic mulches add organic matter to the soil as they decompose.

Mulching is possibly the most important single thing you can do to reduce landscape maintenance. It is both a design feature and a maintenance operation because the mulch must be replenished during the season to maintain the desired depth.

9. **USE THOSE "OLD RELIABLES."** Select the toughest plants for the site, not those that have the brightest flowers. Picking the best plant for the site keeps work and problems to a minimum. Look at what the neighbors grow. Find out what does well around the neighborhood by visiting nurseries, botanical

gardens, and trial gardens. Remember that old reliables earned that name by doing well over the years under various conditions.

10. **AVOID TREES.** Locating beds around trees

is bad for both bedding plants and trees. Every time you turn the soil or dig a hole you are disturbing the tree. Plus, bedding plants don't have a chance competing with a tree for water and nutrients. Then there is the dilemma of watering. If you water often enough to keep the bedding plants from wilting, you are over-watering the tree. In the case of palms in particular, the combination is deadly for the palm. Always locate beds, which need frequent watering, away from trees, which do not.

11. **KEEP IT SIMPLE.** The greater the variety of plants used in a given landscape, the greater the amount of work and expertise required. It's so easy to forget or overlook things that are required for particular plants when there are too many kinds. Simplicity is usually better, both for appearance and for maintenance.

MAINTENANCE OPERATIONS.

The following practices can help keep your work expenditure down to a minimum, while keeping your benefits up to the maximum.

1. **WATER** is essential, but not too much, and not too little. Encourage deep, infrequent waterings rather than short daily sprinklings. Watch for indicator plants. Impatiens will wilt before most other bedding plants; waiting to irrigate until the impatiens start to wilt is one way to supply water based on plant needs rather than on a rigid schedule. More bedding plants die or perform poorly in South Florida because

of over-watering than because of any other factor which we can control.

2. **KEEP LEAVES DRY** longer by watering between midnight and dawn, when there is usually a dew on them anyway. If you water in

the afternoon or evening, you are lengthening the period during which the leaves remain wet, and this will contribute to disease development. Providing space among the plants for air circulation will also help them dry more quickly.

3. WEED beds manually, but also look at some of the herbicides available. Most of the time, if you mulch well, few weeds will come up; and those which are blown in as seeds are easy to pull, because they're not deep-rooted. Weeds also can harbor insect pests and disease-causing organisms.

4. AVOID FREQUENT CULTIVATION because it brings up new weed seeds, and it can damage roots. There are a number of post-emergence herbicides that can be used over many annuals to control grassy weeds.

5. REGULARLY DEAD-HEAD bedding plants that are not self-cleaning. Regular removal of the old flowers and fruit (seed structures) promotes continuous flowering and produces a stronger plant.

6. Some bedding plants, like petunias, vinca, and impatiens, can be REJUVENATED once or twice if you prune them back and fertilize. Remember that bedding plants are called annuals (or treated as annuals) because they complete their life cycle in one year (one season, actually). They all will eventually wear out and die. Don't spend too much time and money trying to keep from replacing some 78¢ plants. When it's time for change, just do it.

7. Do not try to KEEP bedding plants TOO LONG. They grow for a long period in South Florida since they are not usually bothered by frost. Quality and flowering, however, always decline as the plants pass maturity. Don't keep a bed of declining plants because a few plants are still blooming. When it's time for change, just do it.

8. KEEP plants GROWING VIGOROUSLY by following regular fertilization and watering schedules, modified as needed by observation. Vigorous plants last longer and look better.

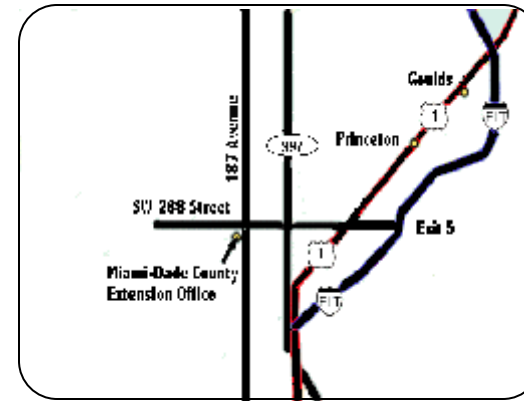
9. BE REALISTIC. No landscape is perfect. There may be a few insect-eaten leaves, a couple of small weeds, and maybe a few dead flower heads. This is not to say that the leaves should pile up, the weeds grow higher than the flowering plants, or the irrigation is never fixed. Be realistic: aim for what can be achieved on the budget allowed. Perfectionism is expensive, and can contribute to environmental problems, as well.

.....

Selected References

1. Black, R.J., and B. Tjia. 1988. *Annual flowers for Florida*. Cir 569. Florida Coop. Ext. Ser.. 4 pp.
2. _____, and E.F. Gilman. 1997. *Your Florida guide to bedding plants selection, establishment and maintenance*. S.P. 185. University of Florida, I.F.A.S., Gainesville. 71 pp.
2. Hensley, D.. 1998. *Words of wisdom for low-maintenance landscaping*. Landscape, Floriculture, and Ornamental News No.3, Hawaii Coop. Ext. Ser.. p 2.

.....



Special thanks to Kimberly Klock-Moore, University of Florida - Fort Lauderdale Research and Education Center for reviewing this publication.

.....

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY PROGRAMS ARE OFFERED TO ALL PERSONS REGARDLESS OF RACE, COLOR, RELIGION, NATIONAL ORIGIN, GENDER, AGE, DISABILITY, OR SEXUAL ORIENTATION. DISABLED INDIVIDUALS ARE REQUESTED TO NOTIFY PROGRAM AREA (305-248-3311) TWO WEEKS PRIOR TO PROGRAM IF AUXILIARY AIDES OR ASSISTANCE IS REQUIRED. DISABLED PARKING SPACE AND WHEELCHAIR RAMP AVAILABLE.

.....

.....

In Writing

Publications for the horticulture professionals of Miami-Dade County.
 Fact Sheet No. 35
 Prepared by: Joseph F. Garofalo
 Extension Agent / Commercial Ornamentals
 Miami-Dade County Cooperative Extension Service
 printed 3/2000 Bedding Pts Last 3 2000 f

MAKE YOUR BEDDING PLANTS LAST LONGER

Miami-Dade County / University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service



EXTENSION