

GREEN TIPS

Department of Horticulture - Michigan State University

Planning and Designing with Annuals

Annuals are those garden ornaments that flower during the first season of growth and then either produce seeds and die or are killed by frost in the fall. Other plants often treated as annuals include biennials (plants normally requiring two years or parts of two years to complete their life cycle) and tender perennials that are unable to withstand winter conditions in the North, although some annuals withstand light frost.

Annuals can provide “instant color” in a landscape and are popular garden flowers. They can put on a splendid show during the summer, they are generally easy to grow and inexpensive, and they thrive in a wide range of soil types and climatic conditions.

Annuals can be used alone in a garden in beds or borders, as a foundation plantings, in window boxes, in planting tubs, as temporary hedges and screens, and as vines. They also can be used with other herbaceous plants, such as bulbs or perennials, or to fill empty spaces or add color to patios when planted in pots or other containers. Annuals are at their best, however, when planted in large expanses or beds.

Depending on location and design, annual flower beds can fill a variety of roles in the garden. Although providing color is their main function, annual flower beds have other uses. They can be a continuous source of cut flowers for the house. Flower borders can act as a transition zone or division between two areas of the landscape, such as patio and lawn. Equally important, annuals are an inexpensive, although temporary, way to landscape. Not only does this allow for endless variety and combinations of colors and shapes, but annuals may also act as fillers before more permanent plants such as perennials, shrubs or trees become established.

Regardless of how annuals are used, they are best in groups of no less than three to five plants. Indeed, annuals are most effective when grown in large groups or varicolored drifts of the same plant, or a variety of plants of the same color. Rarely is a single plant effective because it tends to become lost in the overall

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landscape. Examples of bright combinations would be a center of red geraniums with a border of blue ageratum, or a center of pink petunias with a border of white sweet alyssum.

Planning

Proper flower garden planning is very important and considerable thought should be given to it. The garden location will depend on a number of factors: available space, slope, exposure (sunny or shaded), size and shape of the lot, presence of large shade trees, location of adjacent buildings, drainage and soil type. Most annuals grow best in full or at least partial sun. Only a few do well in full shade.

Visual Concerns - It is important to plan before digging up a bed. The following ideas should help in choosing an appropriate location.

Unity - The bed should fit into the whole landscape and should not seem out of place. Try these techniques:

- Set the bed into an existing border or foundation planting around the house.
- Continue a line of existing objects, such as walks, walls or fences.
- Reflect the geometric or curvilinear patterns of the house, pavement or existing plantings.
- Use mass planting, putting many plants of a single cultivar together, and make the bed large enough so that it does not look inconsequential like an afterthought.

Variety - Make the bed different from the rest of the yard:

- Use brightly colored flowers
- Choose plants of various heights.
- Plant a bed that juts out slightly from an existing bed.
- Take care not to make a bed so different that it seems out of place.

Accent - Create focal points in the landscape:

- Direct the viewer's eye to natural focal points in the yard, such as the front door, a birdbath or a

distant view.

- Consider how the garden will be viewed from windows. Beds planted near focal points such as mailboxes, birdbaths, and landscape lights should be broad enough to provide a base and visual balance for the object.

- Direct the viewer's eye away from poor views. Beds should not be located near garage doors, sheds, compost piles, or unattractive neighboring lots.

Softening and Screening - Reduce the impact of unattractive objects or views:

- Use large flowering plants to hide garbage cans, well covers or compost piles.

- Large flowering plants, vines, tall flowers such as hollyhocks can soften a blank wall such as the side of a house or garage.

- Plant low flowers in front of the nonflowering stems of tall flowers and vines.

Designing

Why design a garden? Designing an annual flower garden and seeing it develop before your eyes can be rewarding. It takes time, knowledge and experience to prepare a good plan. The planning stage too often is overlooked by the impatient gardener, and the result is a haphazard collection of plant materials. The eye needs a sense of order. Too many variations in sizes, shapes, colors and textures create confusion.

Remember that the most spectacular gardens all begin with a carefully thought-out design that has strong lines and structure.

Five Steps in Garden Design

Step #1 - Determine the point(s) of viewing.

Step #2 - Consider existing conditions.

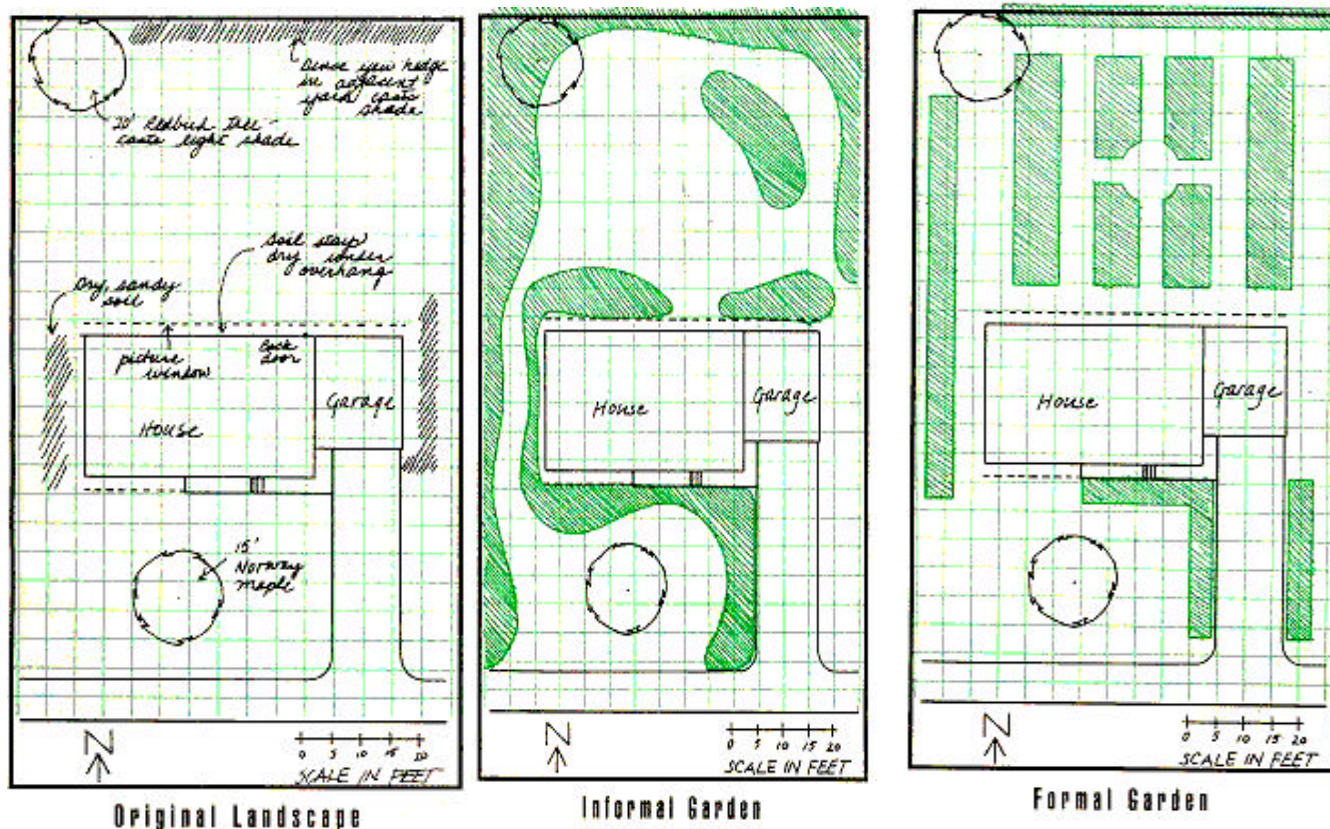
Step #3 - Decide on style-either informal or formal.

Step #4 - Choose the type of display.

Step #5 - Select plants.

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Step #1: Determine the point(s) of viewing.



Place beds or borders where they can be readily seen and admired. Try to locate them in areas of high visibility, such as the front yard, near windows, the porch or patio, while keeping in mind other factors such as soil type, drainage, pH and light. Also consider that certain trees, such as black walnut and butternut, produce a chemical in their roots that is toxic to many plants. Locate susceptible plants a minimum distance of 60 feet from such trees. Some trees, such as Norway maples, have shallow root systems that will compete with herbaceous plants for moisture.

Step #2: Consider existing conditions.

Use graph paper to sketch the layout of your yard, and a scale of 1/4 inch = 1 foot. If the scale is insufficient, use 1/4 inch = 2 feet. With the tape measure, determine the size of the area you wish to plant. Carefully record the location of existing plants that you want to keep and other permanent or temporary fixtures, such as a compost pile, posts, a water spigot, trash barrels, septic tanks and drain fields. Indicate any low or high points and shaded area of the property. Determine the soil type(s), such as clay, sand or

loam; acid or neutral; well drained or poorly drained.

Step #3: Decide on style-either informal or formal.

An informal style follows the natural terrain by using curved, flowing lines. It creates balance without being symmetrical and highlights existing and future plant specimens. A formal style uses straight, geometric lines to determine the shape of the bed. It often relies on symmetry, i.e., matching one side of the garden with the other. The rectangular shape may be repeated in other architectural elements, such as the house, pool, lawn or patio.

Most decisions on style are a matter of personal preference. Here are a few points to consider:

- If your property has no outstanding natural features and is relatively flat, you may use either style.
- If your yard is irregularly shaped with slopes, hills, rock outcroppings or mature specimen trees the informal style is preferred.
- Consider the style of the house and select the style of the garden that will complement it best.
- Formal gardens are usually harder to maintain in top condition.

Step #4: Choose the type of display.

Three types of displays are commonly used for annual gardens the border bed, the island bed and containers.

A border is a cultivated area that bounds an expanse such as a lawn, walkway, driveway or wall. If flush against a wall or hedge, the border should not be wider than 4 to 6 feet for ease of maintenance. For a wider border, plan a narrow path between the wall and the garden for access. The path will be hidden from the view and will improve air circulation behind the tallest plants, and so should help reduce disease problems. For a pleasing relationship between the depth of the border and the size of the yard, do not allow it to exceed one-quarter of the total width of your yard.

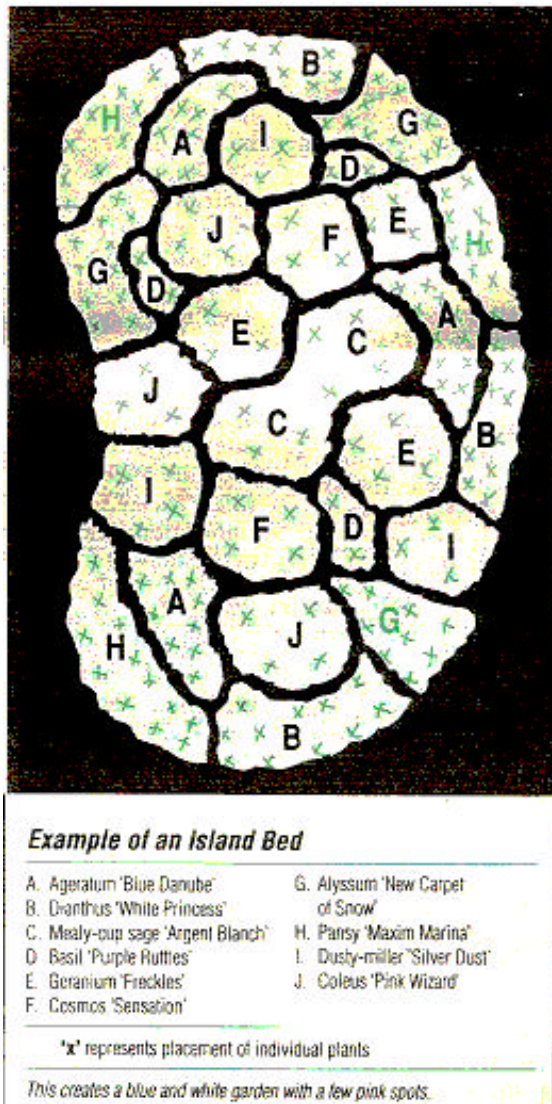
An island bed is cultivated area surrounded by an open expanse, such as a lawn. Because it is accessible

from all sides, it is easier to maintain and it admits more sunlight and encourages better air circulation than a border next to a hedge or structure.

This type of simply can break up large, open areas.

A wide variety of containers can be used with annuals to make a display, such as tubs, planters, hanging baskets, columns, trees made from several to many hanging containers, strawberry jars, free-standing forms, animals and other figures using annuals, etc. Some of the smaller containers such as patio pots and tubs are moveable so that they can be used in a variety of locations indoors and outdoors, from patio to porch or balcony or other area.

Many kinds of annuals are used as cut flowers in bouquets and floral arrangements. Several are popular for drying, including cockscomb, globe amaranth, honesty, immortelle, statice, strawflowers, summer cypress, unicorn flower and some of the grasses. Most can be dried easily by hanging them upside down in a dry, airy location out of the sun.



Flowers for cutting are often located in a separate garden or location so that they do not detract from other plantings when they are removed. Spacing is similar to that listed in the Annual Selection/Care Guide, but growing in rows is preferred for easier culture.

Step #5: Select plants.

Decide if the garden is to be an annual or combination garden. Most gardens are combination gardens containing annuals, bulbs and perennials that might be acquired and planted in the fall. You may want to select a few fragrant plants such as sweet alyssum, stock and flowering tobacco. Two very popular bulbous plants often grown as annuals are tuberous begonias and dwarf dahlias. Other summer-flowering bulbs such as gladioli and caladiums can be combined with annuals as well.

When selecting plants, make a list of your favorites. Consider the space limitations of the site: would smaller, compact plants be appropriate? Should taller plants with spreading habits be included? Match the soil type, light levels and site climate with the requirements of preferred plants. Carefully consider individual plant characteristics, as well as the overall character of the garden. There are many kinds of annuals. Review the accompanying lists and charts for examples of annuals with various heights, colors, light requirements and other attributes. Using these lists, you can determine the annuals you want for your garden. Seed catalogs and seed packages are also good sources of information. Many books and catalogs on annuals are available with pictures and other information that can help you select plants.

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