

an annual

A little care in planting means bigger, more abundant blooms.

BY RICHARD RIX

Professional gardeners can plant a spring garden with amazing speed. They arrive in a pickup truck that's loaded with flats and pots of flowers, and in a couple of hours the whole job is done.

Unfortunately, many amateurs see only this part of the exercise and figure all they need to do is buy their flowers, dig the holes and plop in the flowers (often drowning them with cold water afterward). Then, as summer progresses, they wonder why they don't achieve the same results as the professionals.

What they don't know is that the professional has generally put in a lot of work before the actual planting, such as cultivating (digging) the beds several times over in early spring and enriching them with humus and nutrients.

If you're going to plant your own annuals this spring, at least dig the bed over first to a depth of 20 cm. That's the most you'll need for annuals, which seldom grow much deeper in their short lives, but it's the least for perennials, which will go on feeding there for many years.

We'll concentrate on annuals here, though spring is the best time to plant perennials too.

Simplified, annuals live for one glorious season and may be planted as spec-

imens, in groups or in masses. Any plant may qualify for any category, but clearly such flowers as alyssum, geraniums and salvia will look better in a mass, while larger or more expensive flowers are likely to find use as specimens or in groups. The old saying that two's company, three's a crowd does *not* apply to the flower garden, where groups of three work very well indeed.

It may sound obvious, but do ensure that you consult the planting tag that comes with your annuals. Portulaca, for example, must have full sun, and no amount of feeding and watering will compensate for the lack of it. Part sun/part shade on the tag does not mean dappled sunlight, but rather that the plant can tolerate a full blast of sun or full shade for part of the day. By all means experiment with one or two specimens in an area you're not sure about, just to see how they do for next time.

One trick to successful planting is to ensure that water will be able to collect around the plant's base during the hot summer months, instead of running off. This means trying to create a slight depression around it – not by deep planting though, because the roots of most annuals grow best when warm. Indeed,



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some annuals, such as impatiens, shouldn't be planted until the first week of June, when the soil is thoroughly warmed.

For best results, try to imagine each plant sitting in the middle of a right-way-up saucer. The area around the stem should be raised a little, and there is a depression which slowly rises back up to main bed level.

A good tip when planting is to dig maybe a couple of dozen holes and fill them up with water from the hose. While you're digging the next batch of holes, the previous ones will have drained, and you can plant in saturated soil that will help prevent roots from drying out in the weeks ahead. Water all new plantings well, but try to keep water off the foliage, at least the first few times. By the way, your hand spade can be a useful tool for measuring the distance between plants.

The planting medium is important, and unless you have superb soil to begin with you should add slow-release nutrients with, humus as you plant. A backfill combination of sifted compost, peat moss and some of the original soil, mixed in roughly equal parts, works well – even better if you throw in a handful or two of bone meal as you mix them together. You'll have some soil left over which will come in handy for other jobs.

Of course, we almost all like a home-grown ripe tomato come August and September, and they can be planted, in full sun, just like your annuals. In the Toronto area, after May 1 it's generally safe from frost, though you might have to protect your tomatoes the occasional night. ✨

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