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annual flowers – create summer colour

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COURSES & EVENTS

Here's a good game to play: if some kind of crisis hits and your own personal credit crunch shrinks your garden to a few square yards, which plants would you keep as your absolute summer favourites? For me, I would major on reliability and colour with these annual flowers.

INSPIRE ME

Cosmos crew

ADVICE

My number one and two would be annual flowers from the cosmos family. I'd probably choose the pure white, *Cosmos bipinnatus* 'Purity' as my first.

Its delicate, yet abundant, highly cut and feathery leaves in the brightest green, are the ideal backdrop to the clear, honest prettiness of the single white, gold-centred flowers.

It's hard to beat, but I also love the rich carmine-red *Cosmos* 'Dazzler', ideal for a different place and mood in the garden.

Then there's the pale pink with carmine centre, *Cosmos* 'Versailles Tetra' and shorter *Cosmos* 'Antiquity', with flowers in the colours of a beautiful faded tapestry.

These cosmos are perfectly designed plants, massive performers, even with a dose of healthy beginners' neglect. If you sow them now, they germinate easily within a week (particularly if you can give them a bit of heat, at about 65C). Sow them into *Jiffy pellets*, or sow two seeds straight into *individual pots*. If both seeds germinate, thin to one after a week.

Then, when they have three pairs of leaves, pinch out the tips, leaving at least one pair of leaves. They're guaranteed to be in flower in 10 weeks and will be covered in hundreds of buds and flowers from then until Guy Fawkes night.

Stake the taller varieties ('Purity', 'Dazzler' and 'Versailles Tetra') with a single or tripod of canes and some *twine*. I only water mine in an extended drought, but keep them well picked, or deadheaded through the season and - if you sear the stem end in boiling water for 20 seconds - they last a week in water.

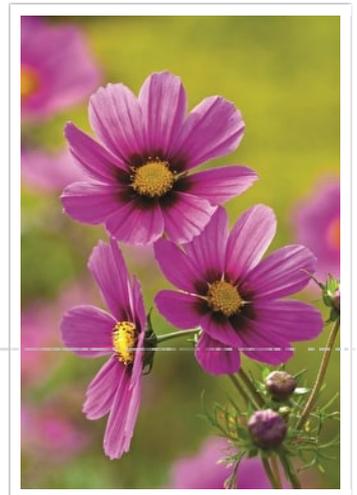
Best of the sunflowers

Another definite would have to be the small-flowered, tall, bushy and prolific flowerer, *Helianthus debilis* 'Vanilla Ice'. This - like the cosmos - will be in flower in 10-12 weeks and you sow and grow it in exactly the same way.

I love the large-flowered sunflowers, too, pollen-free florist's varieties like the deep port-wine-red, *Helianthus annuus* 'Claret' and primrose yellow *Sunflower* 'Valentine', but they won't be quite as floriferous as 'Vanilla Ice'.

Dahlias and zinnias

The cosmos and sunflowers will give you light, fluffy clouds of colour, with as much foliage as flowers, but you could also do with some meaty blooms to centre the plot and give more oomph. Grow zinnias and dahlias for that.



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Choose zinnias either in single colours such as the deep red, Zinnia 'Benary's Red', Zinnia 'Giant Purple' or Zinnia 'Cactus Orange', or mix the whole lot up together in [Zinnia 'Giant Dahlia Mix'](#).

Zinnias don't like cold nights, so if you want to get them going now, you're best to sow them into modules or gutter pipes and transplant from there, with no root disturbance, in about a month. Or, wait until the middle of May and sow seed where you want them in the garden.

For dahlias, select two or three of the incredible doers: one of the varieties that flower for five months, bulk up quickly so the tubers survive reliably from one year to the next without lifting, and that last well in the vase so you can have a house as well as a garden full of colour.

This does not apply to all dahlias, which can be quite transient once cut, but if you go for [Dahlia 'Rip City'](#) (large) or [Dahlia 'Tamburo'](#) (small) in crimson black, [Dahlia 'Karma Fuchsiana'](#) in coral and [Dahlia 'Ambition'](#) spiky and bold, in deep purple, you are on to certain winners.

Put several of these tubers together - old stem uppermost - in a wooden or plastic greengrocers' crate in the next few weeks and fill the crate with damp compost. Once each tuber is beginning to shoot and the frosts are over, plant in the garden. Like the cosmos, just stake and leave them and they'll make an invaluable contribution.

Great climbers

I'd then add a climber to break through all this horizontal glamour, and [Mina lobata](#) would be my first choice. The orange, yellow and red flame flowers of this vigorous annual are sweet and delicate - like mini Chinese pagodas - but overall, their impact on any sort of arch or tepee is tremendous and they're one of the easiest annuals to germinate and grow.

[Cobaea scandens](#) (cup and saucer plant) is wonderful too, but you need to start it off early and all too often the seeds rot before they germinate, but this is not so with ipomoea. Just chuck them into a seed tray, or their own pot - again two seeds to each one - and they'll be up within the week.

Lovely leaves

The last two or three plants you should grow are foliage providers - the rice to go with all this curry. Scatter some seeds of [Salvia viridis 'Blue'](#) or [Cerinthe major 'Purpurascens'](#) into a seed tray, gutter - or just direct into the soil - and both will be in flower within eight weeks and give you blues and silvers to calm the richness of the rest, right through until the autumn.

Special performer

And finally, give one slightly trickier plant a go, [Moluccella laevis \(Bells of Ireland\)](#), which will still be looking good in the garden as you pick your berries and twigs for a wreath at Christmas. This can be stubborn to germinate, but should come up after the shock of a week in the freezer.

Freeze a packet of seed in the next week, sow into a seed tray, then prick out into their own pots for planting in the garden in the middle of May.

As long as you can find them a site in the sun, every one of these plants will give you magnificence and beauty week after week. Even if you've never sown or planted a seed or tuber, you'll be fine with these and now - this week - is the moment to start. By the end of this summer, you'll be hooked and wonder what you've looked at in previous years in your garden before you got to know these A-list stars.

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