

Festive Potted Garden Plants



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Written by G. Edwin Varner.

Preface

Elevate the style and charm of your patio, porch, courtyard, terrace, or deck by incorporating the colorful annual plants described in this entertaining and informative container gardening ebook.

Portions of this publication's content are from my previous works on different floral subjects. I revised the wording and corrected some now-noticeable errors while researching the following plants.

The digital photos are of the flowers at my home, public gardens, many nurseries within my area, and Creative Commons (CC0) licensed images.

Introduction

Not everyone interested in flower gardening has extensive beds and borders to plant many types of flowers. What if your enthusiasm for this activity and lack of growing space conflict? What can you do to remedy this sad situation?

This entertaining and informative ebook describes colorful annual plants for container gardening, transforming your dull outdoor relaxation area into superb elegance.

Why settle with only outdoor furniture when you can add planters, pots, and hanging baskets filled with decorative, low-maintenance, and unusual annuals? Not only do these long-blooming plants provide you with fantastic season-long floral and leaf displays, but they also enhance your relaxation and outdoor entertainment appeal.

You can purchase most of the following annual plants in larger garden centers. Some are unique varieties that are vegetatively propagated, while others can be seed-grown and found in seed catalogs or websites. They are easy to sow, grow, and transplant into various containers by late spring or early summer.

Be creative and experience the joy of transforming your boring outdoor living space into an area of enjoyment, serenity, and comfort by growing the following plants.

Abutilon – Flowering Maple

Abutilon hybridum



Although their common name says Maple, these tropical and semi-tropical, woody shrubs are in a different classification than a Maple tree. The leaves look similar to a Maple, but they are not related. These plants grow in the tropical areas of the Americas, Africa, Australia, and Asia. The standard type found in many larger garden centers is a hybrid of two or more species.

The flowers resemble a Mallow or a Hollyhock, which is unsurprising since they are all in the same family. Many varieties sport colorful three-inch diameter flowers either shaped like a lantern or opened into a large cup. Known as Chinese Bellflowers or Chinese Lanterns, they can grow to over three feet tall and wide when grown outdoors in

fertile, well-drained soil and prefer as much sunshine as possible. When cultivated in a container, their size will be less. Cascading varieties can grow in large hanging baskets.

Considered annuals, they are not hardy in most areas and need to grow in containers if you wish to store them indoors for the winter. They have no significant disease or insect problems, but tiny beasties, such as aphids, whiteflies, and those horrible web-making spider mites, can cause problems later in the summer or over winter.

Flowering maples can grow from seed but are usually offered in mixed colors. They grow slowly and most likely would not bloom before fall. Propagate named varieties by cuttings to keep their colorful uniqueness.

These plants were popular in the late 1800s, but attitudes changed and became obsolete. Today, they can be challenging to find in many nurseries. But fear not, for new generations of gardeners see them in a new light, thanks partly to longer-blooming colorful hybrids. Why not try them? At least you don't have to rake the leaves in the fall.

Angelonia

Angelonia angustifolia



A relative of our common *Antirrhinum* or snapdragon, this beautiful plant is native from Mexico to Argentina. They are perennial growers there, but elsewhere are fast-growing and long-blooming annuals.

Angelonia is the “new flowering kid on the block,” for this plant first appeared in garden centers in the late 1990s. They were spindly things with small, unattractive, wide-spaced flowers, and gardeners were not impressed with them. But breeders considered they had significant improvement potential. They were correct in their assessment. Since then, growers have supplied garden centers with many outstanding, colorful, ever-blooming varieties.

The flower colors range from blue to purple, with some having pink or white petals. Some types have brilliant eye-catching bi-coloring. One other remarkable quality of these plants is the foliage. When handled, the leaves smell of apples or grapes! What we have here is a delightful multitasking plant.

This plant prefers to grow in full sunlight and well-drained, fertile soil in containers, beds, or borders. Treat it like regular snapdragons coming next, and it will provide you with summer-long enjoyment. Occasionally, clip off spent flower spikes to encourage fresh growth and new flower formation to enhance continuous blooming.

Antirrhinum – Snapdragon

Antirrhinum majus



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Times have changed since I was a boy. Yes, the frequent changes in politics, technology, environmental degradation, climate change, social issues, and other essential matters immediately come to mind — but also, surprisingly, flowers. Of all the plants I can measure as having undergone so many changes, it is this popular annual.

What seems like eons ago for me, “snaps” were tall, stately plants grown extensively in flower gardens. I remember my mother sowing and transplanting the seeds into the garden. Upon blooming, she would cut the stems to decorate the house.

The flowers provide easy interactive fun for children (and us childish adults.) The “jaws” of the tubular petals will snap shut when you open them with your fingers. I remember how enthralled I was when I saw bumblebees struggle to open the dragon’s jaws to climb into the floral throat, only to disappear and reappear as they emerge. That was innocent fun for a supposedly innocent age.

Historically, different countries had unique interpretations of what a snapdragon flower resembles. Oriental cultures view a blossom as the head and jaws of a dragon or as a less menacing goldfish mouth. I would hate to encounter roaring, fire-breathing goldfish.

Other Asian societies believe the flowers resemble rabbit lips (I guarantee you will be thinking about that all day), and in Northern Europe, the blossom resembles a lion’s roaring mouth. My goodness. Floral interpretations of the mouths of dragons, goldfish, rabbits, and lions are reminiscent of a bizarre Rorschach psychological test. Instead of analyzing weird-looking inkblot pictures, use snapdragon flowers instead.

Breeders have made most snapdragons more “open-mouthed” and place a greater emphasis on developing dwarf varieties. This may reflect that many gardeners do not have large beds or borders to raise the taller varieties but grow shorter types in containers. They look attractive when blooming, and it is convenient to move the pots around to find the perfect spot to highlight them.

All snapdragons need to grow in plenty of sunlight, fertile, well-drained soil, and some stakes if you prefer to grow the taller types to keep them standing tall and proud.

Many colorful varieties are available as seeds from seed catalogs and online nurseries. Your local garden center will have a few transplantable-sized plants, usually in mixed colors. The hybrid types will be loaded with blossoms and bloom non-stop (with regular clipping of spent flower spikes) from midsummer to fall.

Begonia

**Begonia tuberosa hybrida; boliviensis;
semperflorens**



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Mother Nature appears to have favorite flowers. She has outdone herself in creating many types of plants, but Begonias are a prime example of her endearment, for she has over 1,300 species. Most of these species are tropical or semi-tropical but grow well in partly shaded flower beds or containers.

Most begonias have thick, fleshy stems – an adaptation to store water when the soil becomes too dry. They grow best in well-drained soil that periodically dries. If subjected to soggy soil, the stems and tubers will

rot and kill the plant. Some begonias develop tubers or thickened rhizomes (stems) that act as energy storage structures to survive during the dry seasons in the tropics but will die if subjected to freezing conditions.

No matter what type of growth, size, or shape, their popularity lies in their showy and colorful leaves and flowers. The flowers can be simple, single-petaled blossoms to flamboyant, billowy, large-petaled ones. Their leaves can be dark green to bronze with random contrasting patterns.

Let's concentrate on three types of Begonias we can plant in partly sunny to shady locations. Yes, they can adapt to full sunlight, but depending on the variety or the species, that may cause discoloration of the flowers and excessive leaf dryness. Dappled sunlight or partly shaded locations and well-drained, fertile soil provide excellent growing conditions for these plants in bedding locations or in any container.

Let's start with Tuberous Begonias (*Begonia tuberosa hybrida*), which are popular annuals usually grown for displays in hanging baskets and containers. They are tender plants treated as annuals, even though you can save the tough, fibrous, concave-shape tubers over the winter. That's the theory, but the tubers may dry and die by spring. I recommend purchasing new plants each spring in any nursery or garden center.

Tuberous Begonias produces those colorful and flamboyant "fluffy" flowers that resemble roses. These are the male blossoms, while the female flowers are less excessive in the number of petals.

These plants are sensitive to wet soil, for the tubers and stems can rot if not grown in well-drained, porous soils. They can adapt to full sunlight, but the harsh heat can damage the blossoms and leaves. Deep shade limits blooming and can make the stems and leaves too floppy and succulent, providing prime conditions for fungal and other disease problems. So, the best "Goldilocks condition" is growing these plants in partly sunny or dappled shady areas.

All garden centers offer these Begonias each spring. A tried-and-true variety to purchase is the “**NonStop**” colorful selections.



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The Trailing Begonia or *Begonia boliviensis* is more adapted and better-looking when cascading from hanging baskets. The plants act as a fountain by growing upright, flopping over, and causing the ever-blooming single or semi-double flowers to dangle downward over the basket. The additional beauty of this plant is you practically do not have to pluck off the spent flowers (although some tidiness maintenance is always beneficial.)

For this begonia, you can suspend it in full sun to partial shade for the best blooming potential, but make sure the potting soil is fertile and well-drained. The plant can tolerate dry conditions for an extended period, but weekly watering is perfect if no rain has fallen.



The most commonly grown Begonias offered to gardeners are the ordinary, low-growing annual **Wax or Bedding Begonias** (*Begonia semperflorens-cultorum*)—as shown above. Their flower colors include red, rose, pink, and white. The “waxy” or shiny leaves are grass-green to reddish-bronze.

Of all the Begonias, these are more tolerant of growing in full sun, but partly shady areas highlight their beauty. If you ever become tired and disillusioned over constantly planting Impatiens in shaded areas, these are a great substitute. But, unlike Impatiens, these plants dislike growing in consistently moist soil. Hooray—you can save money on that monthly water bill! Well-drained but fertile soil that periodically becomes dry is to their liking. Otherwise, constant wet soil will rot the roots and stems.

I have seen spectacular bedding displays of these plants growing in party-shady slopes or banks. They had excellent drainage here, and the

abundant pink and white blossoms brightened areas under several large trees all summer and into the fall.

Even though they are excellent bedding plants, we should always appreciate the practicality of growing them in containers to highlight those dull areas on a patio or deck.

We can raise all Begonias from seed, which can prove challenging even to the best “green thumb” gardeners. I gave up doing so eons ago and purchased plants from nurseries. The reason for this difficulty is their seeds are almost like dust. Naturally, you can raise blooming plants by sowing them, but it takes specific conditions and lots of time. Fortunately, many nurseries and garden centers offer plenty of inexpensive plants.

Brachyscome – Swan River Daisy

Brachyscome iberidifolia



Who can dismiss growing any daisy in a flower garden? Specifically, can you neglect to raise blue daisies? This Australian native named after the Swan River in western Australia will never disappoint you with all-summer blooming blue petal blossoms with bright yellow centers. Some types also display purple, pink, and white flowers with either yellow or black centers.

Although their display is outstanding in any garden bed, border, or rock garden, you will proudly admire this annual plant when grown in any roomy container on a sunny patio or deck.

The plants grow symmetrical mounded, making them excellent bedding and container subjects, quickly filling in and later spilling over any planter and hanging baskets. The flower stems rise above the foliage so that you will see an abundance of petals for most of the summer.

This plant is borderline maintenance-free, but an occasional trimming of the many spent blooms helps ensure better re-blooming splendor later in the summer.

Naturally grown along the Swan River banks, this daisy enjoys well-drained, fertile, and moist soil. That being said, too much watering will cause its roots to rot. It can withstand occasional drought conditions but, ironically, appears to dislike hot and muggy environments.

For all bedding and container growing needs, ensure the plants grow in as much sunlight as possible to provide the best growth and blooming. Shady locations are not in the best interest of this plant's survival.

You can easily grow this plant by seed or purchase starter plants from your local garden center for faster and longer enjoyment.

There is some confusion concerning this plant and another similar-looking daisy called *Felicia amelloides*, or the Cape Town Blue Daisy. Think of this one as a doppelgänger of *Brachyscome*. A doppelgänger is a person (or thing, in this case) that resembles another individual living elsewhere. For *Felicia*, you will learn more about it in a few more sections on how it closely resembles *Brachyscome*, even though it looks and grows in similar circumstances on another continent.

Browallia

Browallia speciosa or *Browallia americana*



Although classified as a tropical plant, *Browallia* is an annual in most gardens. Johan Browallius (1707-1755), a Swedish botanist, bishop, and physician, discovered it growing in South America. I guess he couldn't decide which occupation to have for a living.

This fantastic annual belongs to the same family as tobacco and petunias. It has the familiar names of Sapphire Flower, Bush Violet, or Amethyst Flower; the star-shaped petals are vivid blue, purple, and white. Easy to grow from seeds sown in the early spring, they will grow and bloom by midsummer in beds and containers. They can also make an indoor potted plant for the winter if placed in a well-lit and warm area.

Browallia grows well in well-drained, fertile soil in full sun to partly shady locations. They can grow up to two feet tall and wide in garden beds and bloom all summer. When grown in containers, clip them back occasionally to control their height.

Three excellent modern varieties, **Endless Illumination**, **Blue Bells**, and **Marine Bells**, sport large, indigo to purple blossoms with small, white centers. These named-variety plants are available in larger garden centers, and species seeds are available in rare seed catalogs. The flowers of the species are much smaller than the cultivated varieties grown today but produce many blossoms.

Caladium – Angel Wings

Caladium bicolor



The other common names of this plant are “Heart of Jesus” and “Elephant Ears.”

Native to open areas of jungles and riverbanks of Central and South America (especially Brazil), this highly colorful leafy plant has been popular since the late 18th century. Its popularity is not for the flowers (which are rare to develop or see) but for the fantastic multi-colored heart-shaped leaves. The colors are combinations or mottled blotches of green, red, pink, and white with contrasting veins. They resemble those of the unrelated Coleus plants but are not as intricate or flashy.

The size of these plants, on average, grows to two feet tall and wide. They prefer to grow in partly shady, moist, well-drained, fertile soils. White or silver-leaved varieties need darker areas to look fabulous. Harsh sunlight will burn the leaves, forming hideous brown spots and leaf edges. More colorful varieties will look better when grown in morning sunlight or later in sun-dappled locations.

No matter where you plant them, please ensure they grow in moist soil (but never soggy,) well-drained, porous ground. They will suffer if left in dry conditions for an extended time and go prematurely dormant.

There are many varieties, but your selection should concern how much shade your garden, patio, or deck receives for the summer. One advantage of growing them in larger containers is moving the pot around to find the best lighting to admire the leaf coloration. Gorgeous silvery-white leaf varieties grow best in shaded areas, while vivid pinks and reds look fabulous in partly sunny/shady areas.

One crucial cultural note is to wait until early summer to plant your tubers or place your potted plants outdoors. They need warm soil and air temperatures to grow well.

Calibrachoa

Calibrachoa species hybrids



This plant is the new annual kid on the block related to petunias. The resemblance is uncanny and is often mistaken for mini-petunias, but they are in a different family.

They are one of the new bedding plants offered by larger garden centers but are still uncommon in many locations. These plants are native to the open grasslands of Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Argentina, along with wild petunias. They even grow alongside them, which confused botanists into thinking they were small-flowered petunias. Discovered at the same time as petunias (early to mid-19th century), they gained notoriety in the 1990s. This begs the question of why it took so long to acknowledge their existence?

An apparent reason is that *Calibrachoa* has a multitude of small blossoms, giving it the nickname “Million Bells.” For most of flower gardening history, larger flowers (in this case, the petunias) had more priority in attention and for growing. Plants with small flowers (even those with thousands of them) always seem to be a limiting factor in being popular plants. I can imagine what Dr. Sigmund Freud would have said about this botanical-physiological hybrid observation.

Unlike most upright petunias, these plants are sprawlers – some people describe them as “spillers” – for they can cascade over containers, hanging baskets, or carpet the flower bed as a groundcover. These plants can have bright, splashy, contrasting colors. Some varieties have double petals and resemble tiny roses. Also, unlike the pampered petunias, these plants can tolerate drier growing conditions.

One undesirable trait against *Calibrachoa* (specifically their hybrids) is they produce few seeds, which is a limiting factor in raising them in bulk by garden centers. This lack of seeds limits their availability to consumers.

Most of these plants offered today are cutting-grown and patented or trademarked by one commercial company. It has “cornered the market” in producing and selling these plants to gardeners. Having this patent prohibits propagation by other plant propagation businesses. That makes these plants more expensive and uneconomical for bedding. We can all hope by the time you read this, it will solve the seed-production limitations, and other companies will be able to sell the plants.

Celosia – Cockscomb

Celosia argentea* var. *cristata*; *plumosa*; *spicata



I live close to a few Amish communities. During the summer, when they have their weekly livestock auction sales, I will see Amish ladies selling bouquets of these highly colorful but strange-looking flowers that look drawn from a Dr. Seuss book. While traveling around, you can see their gardens or outside boundaries of farm fields dotted with the glowing colors of these and other flowers.

Besides being exceptionally pretty, *Celosia* is excellent for cut and dried flower arrangements, and the smaller types are popularly grown in containers. The flowers differ in color, size, and shape but appear furry velvet. In Mexico, for example, their nickname is “Velvet Flowers.”

There are three species (and assorted hybrids) of *Celosia* flowers:

- For many people, the *Celosia argentea* var. *crispata* varieties flaunt pleasantly gaudy, rounded, folded, brain-shaped flowers on tall stems. A popular color is blood red or purplish-red — the reason for naming *Celosia* as cockscombs.
- Another species is *spicata*, which has smaller but abundant spiky flowers resembling wheat heads.
- The third species is *plumosa*, in which the tiny flowers are airy, feathery, or resemble fire flames (like the above photo illustrates.)

You can choose from many varieties by seed or purchase plants in garden centers. Raising them from seed is lengthy, so if you live in colder locations, your best plan is to buy plants.

All *Celosias* prefer to grow in sunny locations with well-drained soil. They dislike constant moist ground and clay-based soils if raised in beds or borders. Adding sand or coarse gravel to a bed will help establish well-grown plants and abundant flowers for the picking. For container potting mixes, incorporate more perlite or gravel to increase drainage.

Centaurea – Dusty Miller or Silver Dust

Centaurea cineraria



Centaurea is the ever-popular annual bedding plant enjoyed for its bright, silvery-white leaves. Depending on the variety, the appearance of these leaves ranges from being “whole-leaf” to lacey or serrated, which adds a stunning contrast to other colorful annuals and perennials grown in the garden. This plant also makes an impressive brightening display or highlights any area when grown in containers.

Most varieties grow to less than two feet tall but can be bushy. Growing it in plenty of sunlight and fertile, well-drained soil will thrive for your summer enjoyment. I once had this plant survive my Zone 5 garden, but the odds are better in living through a Zone 6 and up during the typical winter.

It makes a great edging plant to complement brightly colorful annual flowers or colorful or darkened foliage. The same concept applies to container plantings. No gardening law (at least, not yet passed by Congress) states you can't have an entire bed, border, or planter filled with them.

This plant can form small flowers during summer but is an irritating distraction. Most people snip them off to keep the shiny, leafy appearance intact.

You can grow this plant via seeds or purchase starter plants in garden centers. Several new vegetative-propagated varieties are available in garden centers, having brighter silver or white foliage, growing only to a foot tall, and forming a mound. They are bred for planters, hanging baskets, or smaller beds. They can be grown alone or highlight other smaller flowering or foliage plants. Two available types are **Chrome Fountain** with shiny silver leaves and **Snowy Owl** with pure white whole leaves. They both look fantastic when grown in a sun-exposed planter!



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To slightly complicate matters, another plant unrelated to the above *Centaurea* plants is *Senecio candicans* “**Angel Wings®**.” It is also labeled as a Dusty Miller for having large, rounded leaves as bright as a white cloud.

It also enjoys plenty of sunlight and well-drained, fertile soil. Once well established, it can tolerate dry soil for extended periods. That is a bonus when displaying it as an outstanding container or potted subject.

The only fault it has is its cold hardiness zone 8 limitation. We cold-climate gardeners have to accept it as an annual. Still, it shows promise of being a winter-over houseplant if given a warm, sunny windowsill to bask on.

Cutting-grown and offered only as small potted starter plants, garden centers, and larger nurseries should have this variety available. If not in

your area, try an internet search of rare-plant nurseries.

Coleus

Coleus blumei



Native to Southeast Asia, *Coleus* has always been popular as colorful foliage annual plants for gardens, containers, and houseplants. Newer varieties are pleasantly gaudy with eye-popping beautiful colors. You can't resist growing a few when you see them in nurseries and garden centers. In my eyes, they resemble gorgeous stained-glass windows with vivid colors and unusual geometric patterns.

These newer varieties also develop fewer flowers. Yes, less flower formation! Imagine getting excited over this when, at any other time, you want as many flowers as possible. Here, the tiny blue blossoms on several thin stems can distract the overall look of the plants when they are growing in the garden and, especially, in any container.

Although they can tolerate more sunlight than older varieties, these plants still grow and look best in partly shady areas. One word of caution when purchasing plants is to make sure which ones can grow in full sun. For most *Coleus* plants, the full intensity of sunlight will damage the leaves, developing brown splotches and faded colors.

Coleus plants range in size from petite to extra-large — both in height and leaf size — but they have the potential to look horrible. I advise choosing one colorful type (or two complementary color patterns) for beds or containers. My rule is to match items – don't mix! Don't over-mix multi-colored varieties, for their combined appearance can look ghastly.

Now, what is out there for you to find and grow? Look for the newer **ColorBlaze** and **Kong** varieties that many nurseries and larger garden centers sell. Again, please read the labels to determine their sun exposure and potential height.

Many growers raise most *Coleus* plants from seed and will have many leaf colors. Each plant will look different. The most beautiful and expensive plants are cutting grown to keep their color complexities and leaf shapes. If you can afford it, purchase several for containers but not for flower beds. You can get up close and personal to enjoy those spectacular colors when grown in containers. They are worth growing!

Cosmos – Chocolate Cosmos

Cosmos atrosanguineus



From Mexico, this plant was once common but became very rare. What happened? In the past, cultivated plants lost the ability to produce seeds. Until now, they were sterile and had to be propagated by cuttings or tubers. In 2010, someone discovered a productive plant producing viable seeds. Now, seeds are slowly becoming available to commercial seed companies. Never underestimate Mother Nature!

Look out for **Chocamocha**, which was first commercially seed-grown in 2012. This attractive plant is a tender perennial that resembles and grows like a small Dahlia but with a flower like the regular Cosmos. The milk chocolate-scented blossoms are a deep garnet or crimson red but appear almost black.

Raise the young plants in full sunlight and fertile but well-drained soil. They are too expensive to plant in beds but are better for growing in containers. You can place the pots where you can enjoy the delicious fragrance all summer long until a killing frost.

The best part of raising these plants in a container is not having to lift out the tubers for the winter. Place the pots in a frost-free (but cool) and dark area. Limit watering to keep the soil mainly dry but enough of “a sip” to keep the tubers hydrated. By spring, resume watering, but wait until after the last frost date to place the pot outside.

Felicia – Cape Town Blue

Felicia amelloides



As promised, there needs to be more clarity concerning this plant and another similar-looking daisy called *Brachyscome* or the Swan River Daisy described earlier. Think of this one as a doppelgänger of *Brachyscome*. For *Felicia*, it closely resembles it, even though it looks and grows in similar circumstances on another continent, in this case, Africa, specifically in South Africa. My, isn't Mother Nature a trickster!

Felicia's flowers mirror those of *Brachyscome* with true-blue petals and bright yellow inner disc florets. Unlike *Brachyscome*, blue is the only color, but who cares? You can't have enough blue in any garden!

Instead of having mounding growth, Felicia spreads more horizontally than vertically. The flowers and stems heighten this plant while the leafy shoots extend outward. This appearance is eye-catching in larger pots and planters, but in hanging baskets, at least in my opinion, it looks “odd.” Due to this excessive spreading habit, they will easily overpower unrelated plants if grown together in containers. For bedding purposes, this expanding growth mimics an attractive small ground cover.

These plants are easy to maintain if grown in a sunny location with fertile and well-drained soil. Although they can withstand some drought conditions, periodic watering (and light fertilizing) is always recommended, but excessive wet soil will kill them.

Their best floral display is from late spring through midsummer, but afterward, with all the previously spent flowers and developing seeds, the plants will look, well... awful. Fear not; all you have to do is give the entire plant a “haircut” by clipping the top growth back to the leaf area. Within a couple of weeks, a fabulous new blue display will result in late summer and fall enjoyment.

You can sow the tiny seeds under grow lights several weeks in advance to set out the young plants after the last spring frost. However, consider purchasing starter plants from garden centers for less work and faster enjoyment.

Fuchsia – Ladies Eardrops

Fuchsia hybrida



You can't go wrong with displaying the hot colors of cascading fuchsia flowers to brighten any cool, shady area. Visit any garden center and prepare yourself for the overwhelming beauty of stunning colors and abundant pendulous blooms from hanging baskets.

The colorfully gaudy sepals and billowy petals are usually bicolored (sometimes tri-colored) of rosy-red, white, pink, and royal purple. Strangely, they always remind me of the late 1800s French cabaret dancers and their fluffy skirts and petticoats performing frenzied high-kicks at the Moulin Rouge. Oh, sorry, I must have been channeling Toulouse-Lautrec at the moment.

There is an incredible number of hybrid varieties created from various species. Their flowers are tubular with partially upright growth, but many plants are showcased by cascading in hanging baskets. You can save money by purchasing small potted plants and making your own hanging basket. Yes, it will take time for the basket to become fully engulfed with fuchsia blossoms. Still, the display will eventually mimic those in the garden center and, in my experience, look and grow better in your area. The problem with greenhouse-grown baskets (of any flower) is they are adapted to the ideal greenhouse environment and will eventually decline in appearance outside it.

A few varieties grow upright but need more height to look their best. Planting these in containers and placing them on a patio wall or deck railing will look more attractive. The plants prefer bright indirect light but can tolerate partial but not deep shade. They bloom well if displayed under an overhang or trellis structure to prevent exposure to excessive sunlight. Make sure they grow in moist, fertile, well-drained soil.

One additional attraction is these flowers attract the neighborhood hummingbirds in droves to suckle the nectar. Make sure you place your hanging baskets and containers where you can enjoy seeing these flying wonders.

Gazania – African Daisy; Treasure Flower

Gazania rigens



If you have yet to grow this plant, you should. This is a fantastic annual or tender perennial, native to the southern coastal regions of Africa. Related to the vast Aster family with large daisy-like “clustered flowers,” it’s an all-purpose plant for bedding and edging in borders. It also doesn’t mind sequestering its roots into any container or planter. Their leaves are usually deep green but may have a silvery underside, giving a partial shininess in the bright sunlight.

Those four-inch diameter daisy flowers radiate hot colors of bright yellow and orange, usually with a contrasting central band of molten

lava red. The effect is startling once seen, and you will see plenty of these flowers from late spring till fall.

There is, however, one disappointing caveat with its blooming that tends to disappoint new gardeners. By evening, and especially during cloudy conditions, the flowers close up and remain that way until exposed to the bright sunshine. These plants are true sun worshipers, thriving in hot areas and don't mind semi-drought conditions. For container plantings, ensure excellent potting soil drainage to prevent extended periods of wet soil. Allow the soil to dry between waterings if no rain is forecasted.

Unlike other flowers mentioned before and after, Gazanias are not low-maintenance, for you will need to trim off (usually called deadheading) the spent flower stalks to prevent excessive seed formation. Not doing so makes the display look messy and can prevent extended blooming. Once a week, trimming your plants will keep them blooming for additional weeks.

You can grow different varieties from spring-sown seeds (indoors for colder locations) and later transplant them to containers or in the garden after the threat of frost or when the weather is reliably warm. Appreciating hot places, these plants waste little time growing and flowering, so don't fret if you delay transplanting for a few weeks in late spring.

You can purchase young plants in small pots or cell packs from nurseries or garden centers, but they usually offer mixed colors. That's fine, but you may obtain something that is not incredibly colorful. Try to purchase same-color plants (depicted on the label if available.) For a recommendation on what to grow, try finding (either seeds or young plants) of the **Daybreak Series**, including '**Daybreak Red Stripe**' or '**Daybreak Tiger Stripes Mix**,' which have reliable complimentary colors. These types are stunning!

Hypoestes – Polka Dot Plant

Hypoestes phyllostachya



I think of *Hypoestes* as disco *Coleus* plants — colorful leaves but highlighted with contrasting spots, like light reflected from a disco ball. You can strut around your garden like John Travolta (as the character Tony Manero in the movie *'Saturday Night Fever'*) while listening to the soundtrack music. Your neighbors will stare at you, but what of it? All weekend gardeners should experience an occasional “Saturday Afternoon Fever” while puttering around in their flower garden.

Native to Madagascar, these plants are strictly tropical and treated as garden annual bedding or container subjects. They dislike full sunlight and will show it by developing brown leaves. If grown in full-shade areas, the leaves are greener with fewer spots and become tall and

floppy. For the “Goldilocks Zone,” place these plants where they receive partial sun and shade. You can also grow them as houseplants, but they need bright, indirect light to display their colors better.

Breeders and growers have developed several hybrid varieties. There are the **Splash** and **Confetti Series** of small-growing plants having a base color of green but highlighted with various sized spots, smudges, smears, and streaks colored of vivid rose, red, pink, purple, lavender-blue, and, for brightness, pure white. For some varieties, it is difficult to determine if the leaves are splattered green instead of those colors!

These plants will grow over a foot tall and wide, creating stunning displays in beds and containers. Many gardeners pinch off the spikes of tiny blue flowers for they are “uninteresting” (sad but true) and distract attention away from the colorful leaves.

Raise these plants in well-drained, fertile, and moist soil. Don’t be in a hurry to plant them in your garden or containers until late spring or early summer. They dislike cool weather and the cold ground.

You may have seen these offered in nurseries and garden centers but passed them by (like I did numerous times.) Next spring, purchase them and turn part of your shady garden or patio into a discotheque.

Impatiens – Touch-Me-Not or Busy Lizzie

Impatiens hawkeri



Hostas may be the go-to perennial for planting in shady garden areas, but the honor of bedding annuals goes to the Impatiens. They are grown everywhere in practically every garden and are the most purchased plant in any garden center or nursery. All hail Impatiens walleriana!

Okay. It's time for a tough-love intervention with my fellow gardeners. Please don't hate me for what I am about to relate to you. Impatiens are, for me, sorry to say, BORING. There, I admit it. That may be heresy in many gardening circles, but they are your basic 'plant-and-forget'

bedding plants. You can't forget about them when they wilt in dry soil and later when you see your water bills.

Each year, breeders create new varieties but lack profound color differences. Giving them "exciting" varietal names is the only way to ignite interest. The only advantage, I believe, in growing these plants is displaying the white (and pale lavender) varieties in shady areas, as they provide sporadic individual "points of light" when grown with other shade-loving plants.

Conversely, if you wish to grow exciting colors of flowers and variegated leaves, select the **New Guinea Impatiens** (*Impatiens hawkeri*) for flower beds and, especially, containers. They tolerate semi-shady areas but enjoy more sunshine. Growers offer new varieties with exceptional leaf colorations in larger garden centers each spring. To exhibit truly festive decorative plants for your deck or patio, these plants will surely please you more than those boring regular Impatiens.

Ipomoea – Morning-glory

Ipomoea species



The sheer size of varieties and species (over 500 worldwide) of the Ipomoea family is apparently a favorite flower of Mother Nature.

Most species sport a similar tubular or funnel-like floral structure with variations in color and size. Several varieties have developed over the years, with colors confined to the blue-purple, pastel reddish-pink, and white shades. Most flowers show a white center and a whitish or darker color star pattern in the petals.

One standard feature they share in common is they are all tropical plants. Yes, there is not one hardy floral-soul in the entire group. As

long as they experience a warm, moist spot to set down roots, they are happy to grow as annuals.

By mid-summer, they produce many flowers daily but bloom only in the morning before the sun becomes too intense. If it is a cloudy day, the show may extend until noon. Why do they do this? Why not bloom all day? No one knows why, but it may apply to early morning pollinating insects.

No matter which variety of Morning Glory strikes your fancy, they are all impressive and easy-to-grow vines for any gardener to grow. Their seeds are relatively large (easy enough to handle) but are very hard. They need soaking in water overnight to soften the seed coats and allow them to germinate.

You can sow the seeds in small pots a few weeks before planting them outside after the last forecasted frost date. Never plant them in cold soil or during extended cool air temperatures.

You can also sow the seeds outdoors in a sunny, well-drained area, including in large containers or hanging baskets. Don't worry about soil fertility; too much fertilizer will produce more leaves and stems than flowers. Since they are vines, and if raised in a bed or container, they will need a supporting structure, like a trellis, fence, or even tall bamboo poles to wrap their climbing tendrils around.

These plants love the heat of the summer and prefer warm growing conditions, both in the air and soil temperatures. They all bloom in midsummer to the first frost.

Several varieties are available in seed catalogs, online nurseries, and garden centers.

Ipomoea – Sweet Potato Vine

Ipomoea batatas



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And now for something totally different — but simultaneously related to the above Morning Glories — are these decorative vines. It will surprise many people that the vegetable garden sweet potatoes are close relatives to our common Morning Glory vines.

Gardeners grow the varieties listed below for their leaf coloration, not their flowers (although pretty if formed), but you should realize these vines do not produce edible sweet potatoes for the dinner table. You can eat them, however, but it has been said they taste “really yucky.” OK. I’ll pass.

As of this writing, two popular varieties are used as contrasting ornamental backdrops to other container plantings — although you can use them alone or both to enjoy their unusual leaf coloration. The **Terrace Lime** or **Margarita** variety has festive lime-green or chartreuse leaves to brighten any container, hanging basket, or bedding plantings.



The other type is called **Blackie**, which has dark purple-red to almost black foliage. This one is perfect for showcasing white-blossomed plants. Both varieties grow best in partly shady areas but can become adapted to full sunlight. To prevent excessive foliage growth, use well-drained potting soil and avoid over-fertilizing. If the plants get too rowdy, trim them to produce extra side growth.

Garden centers often offer them as starter plants since they are unavailable from seed. Like all Morning Glory plants, you can easily self-

propagate more plants via cuttings of shoots. You can usually find some shoots with small rootlets forming on leaf nodes.

For cold-climate gardeners, you can keep these young plants indoors over the winter if pot grown by a window and rooting newly made shoots in the spring to transplant by early summer. Hey, the more, the merrier for next summer's colorful extravaganza of container plantings.

Isotoma – Star Flower

Isotoma axillaris



If you want your patio or deck planter garden to be a star attraction with a galaxy of true-blue star-shaped flowers, you need to grow this stellar plant. This Australian native will be a supernova of beauty all summer.

OK. Enough of the hokey astronomy references. This plant is ideal for all containers, including hanging baskets and mass-planting in beds and borders. It can grow well with other flowers by interweaving in any container. But, to get the most eye-catching delight from this plant, I recommend planting it alone.

It can develop as an ever-blooming mound over a foot high, extending twice as broad. It is reasonably easy to maintain, requiring plenty of sunlight and fertile, well-drained soil. The plants can tolerate periodic dry conditions but still enjoy a weekly refreshing drink of water. Don't make the soil constantly wet; this will make the plant suffer and eventually die.

There appears to be a "perfect" variety that garden centers and landscapers highly recommend growing for outstanding blooming performance. I agree with them. That variety is **Beth's Blue®** (usually sold as **Beth's Blue® Star Flower**.) It's a blooming machine that tolerates hot locations and requires almost no maintenance, including less deadheading of spent flowers (but will look much better with occasional trimming.)

While you can grow the species from seed, it takes almost five months to flower. No, that's too long to wait. Your best recourse is to purchase **Beth's Blue®**. It is a special cultivar that is vegetatively propagated to preserve its unique qualities. You should be able to find it in many online nurseries and local garden centers, ready to grow and bloom abundantly with vivid blue blossoms.

Jamesbrittenia – South African Phlox

Jamesbrittenia hybrid



In the theater world, there is always a substitute called a stand-in or understudy, ready to play the critical role if the leading actor is ill or unable to act. This understudy is usually an “unknown” person who has the potential to out-act the principal actor and become an overnight success. *Jamesbrittenia* is such a botanical understudy for planting in any flowerbed or container.

How many of us have heard of this plant or seen its flowers? Until lately, probably never, but that is about to change. Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to this ever-blooming, low-maintenance, heat-tolerant, and vividly colorful annual from South Africa, ready to

perform for you as a beautiful substitute for our more commonly planted flowers.

While researching for this ebook on selecting the best container and hanging basket plants, I planted this unknown plant, purchased from a garden center, in a large 12-inch diameter pot, along with an unrelated plant. I had no preconceived notion of what the floral display would look like, but by midsummer, I was shocked at how this plant performed. Although it first struggled to compete with growth space with the other plant, it later took command and bloomed uninterrupted all summer. In contrast, the other plant took a long siesta during the hot summery conditions.

The plant does not grow tall but extends outward to drape over a container or cascade from a hanging basket. During this horizontally based growth, the shoots are covered with mind-blowing bicolors emphasizing rose-pink, purple, orange, and white petals.

Place this plant in as much sunlight as possible and well-drained potting soil to maximize bloom potential. Adding time-released fertilizer is always a bonus for stimulating outstanding growth throughout the summer and fall. Although listed as drought-tolerant, watering these plants occasionally (if there is no forecast for rain) will be beneficial for constant blooming.

Deadheading or trimming spent flowers is not a top priority with this plant (for the hybrids may be sterile). Still, if the entire plant looks “messy,” a clip here and there will benefit improved beauty.

So, let’s give hearty applause to this currently underappreciated plant for providing our gardens and containers with outstanding beauty throughout the summer and fall. Its floral performance is spectacular.

Lantana

Lantana camara



I love this woody tropical shrub for its dazzling red, orange, pink, and bright yellow flower clusters. My only fault with it (with no genuine fault of its own making) is the slow growth with limited blooming in a short summer. In warmer locations with a longer growing season, this shrub will produce taller branches and be in constant bloom.

Those who live in these warm climates should try to grow the taller and bushier varieties—some to over four feet tall. They will look great in flower beds, but plant some in larger containers for a patio or deck. Here, you can get more acquainted with the neighborhood butterflies and hummingbirds.

These low-maintenance plants prefer hot weather to thrive, full sunlight, and fertile, well-drained soil. It can tolerate drier soil conditions for limited periods.

You can find potted plants of different colorful varieties in many garden centers. You may find a source for seed — but why bother? Potted plants are ready to grow and attract all those butterflies, day-flying moths, and hummingbirds to your outdoor areas. Come one, come all to enjoy this plant's floral extravaganza!

Mandevilla – Brazilian Jasmine

Mandevilla sanderi



One semi-woody tropical vine popular with many gardeners today is *Mandevilla*. Growers also refer to its old Latin name, *Dipladenia splendens*. Although the common name says Jasmine, this vine is light-years from being one.

Other than *Clematis*, *Mandevilla* is the most purchased vine for new gardeners. Like me, if you are an older gardener, this vine falls under the “*grown some, yeah – they’re nice, time to move on*” classification. The medium-sized, funnel-shaped flowers are pretty, but, for me, it becomes tiresome. I hate stating this, but this vine lacks the appeal of growing it again next year – unless my eyes spot a new flower color.

Henry Mandeville, who, in the early 1800s, served as a British diplomat in Argentina, may have discovered this vine. However, various sources credit them as native to Brazil. No matter, for being later imported into England and throughout Europe, unforeseen problems growing this vine arose. Due to being raised in the North Hemisphere with lesser day lengths in the fall and winter months, the vines did not bloom well. That was a major disappointment, especially for growers trying to sell the plants to gardeners.

It went out of fashion since no one except collectors wanted to grow this plant. In 1955, horticulturists re-discovered this species and strived to improve it genetically to increase its blooming potential. They succeeded beyond their expectations.

Garden centers and nurseries worldwide now sell millions of these vines. Most varieties have light to deep pink and shades of red flowers, but you can also find the elusive white and yellow flowered cultivars.

Insert this vine in containers on patios, balconies, decks, and flower beds. Wherever you plant this vine, it needs a sturdy support to grow on. In the wild, the vines can grow to over 10 feet high, but when grown in containers, the height is a struggle to 5 feet tall. It loves to grow in full to partial sunlight and fertile, well-drained soil.

Maurandya (or Asarina) – Climbing Snapdragon

Maurandya barclayana (scandens) or Asarina scandens



Asarina scandens is no longer accepted as the official Latin name and is now *Maurandya barclayana scandens*. Many nurseries are reluctant to change this "official" name and continue to grow and sell them as *Asarina*. Since I am writing this ebook, I will now refer to this plant in the genus of *Maurandya*. There, I can sleep better now. I don't want the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature police pounding on my door demanding I accept the new name classification.

This unassuming climber-creeper vine comes with familiar nicknames such as Creeping Snapdragon, Creeping Gloxinia, Snapdragon Vine, Twining Snapdragon, and others. Many other vines are robust climbers or ramblers, but this plant is the opposite — it seems weak, limpy-wimpy, and frail.

The stems may look delicate and wiry but, surprisingly, compensate with vigorous growth. They will form longer stems that will wrap around each other and with supporting structures such as trellises, arbors, or nearby shrubs. For most gardeners, it provides an impressive display in hanging baskets.

The tubular, trumpet-shaped, brightly colored flowers resemble open-faced snapdragons. If you have hummingbirds in your area, you will soon see them visiting these flowers.

Hardy only from Zone 9 and up; it is strictly an annual vine for most gardeners. The blossoms bloom all summer into fall when cooler weather ends the show.

The flowers are a fantastic purple, such as the variety Joan Lorraine (shown above), or dark wine-red, rose-pink, and white varieties. For the hummingbirds, the flower color does not matter. If you grow these vines, they will come.

Provide these plants with full to partial sunlight and fertile, well-drained soil to flourish.

You may need help finding them in garden centers. They are easy to grow from seeds, which would be the best way to raise them.

Pelargonium – Zonal Geraniums

Pelargonium hybridum



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Other than Impatiens, our common “geraniums” are mass-planted in gardens and inserted into containers worldwide. Notice I placed “geraniums” in quotation marks; the correct word should be Pelargoniums. Confused? You should be, but I am not falling into the detailed explanation trap. I will let Google handle that mind-numbing lesson. Let’s call them geraniums and be done with it.

Most varieties have solid green leaves or are highlighted with a variegated or contrasting bronze band called zonal leaves. These small but bushy plants have semi-succulent stems topped with pink, violet,

white, salmon-orange clusters and the ever-popular (and traditional favorite) bright red or scarlet blossoms.

These plants prefer to grow in as much sunlight as possible and well-drained, fertile soil. If you meet these conditions, you should have no problem growing them in a garden. Their best attraction is when growing in containers. The container soil drains excess water and dries faster than in a garden, which is ideal for these plants.

They are succulent plants — having stems that retain water even when the soil dries. Surviving in drier soil is vital to having healthy, floriferous plants. This does not mean they behave like cacti; if the ground remains too dry, the plants may not recover and eventually die. The roots and main stem will rot if the soil remains too wet for a long time. Please check the dryness of the soil every few days, especially if it has not rained for a while.

Geraniums sound like good candidates for a carefree garden — which they are “somewhat” — but need dead flower stems clipped off periodically to look their best. What do a few minutes matter each week to perform this essential cosmetic function?

Starting in the late 1700s, with the increased production of glass windows inserted into wooden framework structures (early greenhouses), vast numbers of tender flowering plants, including cuttings of new and rare geraniums, grew during the winter months. Wood and coal-fueled furnaces provided the heat to keep them alive until the growers could plant them outdoors in late spring.

These plants eventually became popular among the general public. People experiencing poverty who lived in cities had no land for planting flowers. They could enjoy at least one potted plant near a door or windowsill. A potted blooming geranium provided color to a dirty gray city environment and elevated the mood of depressed housewives.

This plant may represent the first time people began “cherishing” having a potted plant to help ease tension and depression. These “pet geraniums” made people (lonely women especially) feel needed and act

like companions. That makes better sense than having “pet rocks,” a popular trend beginning in 1975.

Geraniums are prime potted plants since they can tolerate dry and low-fertility soil and have their roots confined within a clay flowerpot. These soil conditions mimic those found in their native southern African regions. Friends would give other friends and family members rooted or un-rooted stem cuttings or side-growing shoots.

Artists often painted potted red geraniums against the backdrop of the dismal homes of common laborers — along with the obligatory sleepy house cat near the pot. Authors such as Jane Austen would include a depressed character shyly retreating from society to enjoy the company of a potted red geranium. Charles Dickens firmly believed in growing them to give the poor and oppressed a reason to smile.

Not all of society loved these plants. At first, the wealthy gentry enjoyed growing them for their estate beds and borders. As the plants became popular and excessively planted, their opinions changed. They then considered the plants vulgarly common because they were too commercialized. If the poor people grew them, that was a significant reason for not having them. Pompous author and playwright Oscar Wilde comically worried that he would become reincarnated as a red geranium instead of a precious orchid after his death. I wonder how he fared? I hope it was the geranium.

Today, geraniums of all colors (yes, especially red) display themselves in beds, borders, pots, gravesites, and window boxes. Most are seed-raised varieties, and gardeners now treat them as annuals, for they all die by the early onset of winter. What was once a cherished plant is now considered a disposable item. That is a rather sad treatment of a once dependable and obedient botanical pet.

Petunia

Petunia hybrida; multiflora; grandiflora



There are over 20 species of Petunia growing in South America. That may not sound like a lot, but this genus took the world by storm when it was first discovered. The storm still rages. Go to your nearest garden center and see the recent results of all the offered hybrid varieties. They continue to enchant and tease us to grow them in our gardens.

It was once thought impossible to accomplish, but new hybrids now flaunt most rainbow colors. There are also shades of 'almost green,' 'almost black,' 'almost yellow,' 'almost blue,' spotted-dotted colors (via a wild-and-crazy genetic disorder called "jumping genes"), and other mixed-up colors. There must be hundreds (well, let's say millions to be on the safe side) of Petunia varieties available for gardeners.

Today's hybrid plants offer better growth and disease resistance than the non-hybrid types provided years ago. The icing on the cake is that all these petunia varieties provide excellent viewing in any bed, border, or container, and some will cascade from hanging baskets.

Two remarkable types perfect for all these areas are the **Wave** or **Supertunia** varieties. They are so floriferous that you see little of their leaves and stems. These new hybrid strains became an instant hit with gardeners because of their quick growth habit and ability to continue making flowers without picking off sticky, spent blossoms. They are especially ideal for your planters and hanging baskets.

A few years ago, gardeners could only purchase these super-plants in pots or plastic packs. Today, you also have the choice to grow them from seed. It's great to do so with the right equipment, knowledge, and time, but purchasing these plants from almost every garden center or nursery is more practical for anyone.

All new and old varieties need as much sunlight as possible and fertile, well-drained soil to grow and bloom well. Yes, they need regular watering and light fertilizing, but spend some time with these flowers and care for them. They will reward you with endearing acclaim and admiration (with some green-eyed envy) from your friends, family, and nosy neighbors.

Phygелиus – Cape Fuchsia

Phygелиus capensis



Here is one colorful plant you will most likely not find in any garden center or nursery, at least not yet. Although it resembles a Fuchsia bush, it is not related. Surprisingly, it's more related to Foxglove and Penstemon flowers.

Native to South Africa, it grows as a semi-evergreen shrub there. It grows as a tender perennial (Zone 7 and higher) or an annual for most locations elsewhere. The deep pink or reddish-orange flowers are tubular, with the interior of the petals being bright yellow. Clusters of these blossoms hang downward from tall stems (inflorescences). You need to look upward to see that vivid yellow interior. Mother Nature should lift those blossoms up more, but she must know better.

The only way to obtain this plant is by growing it by seed, which is easy to germinate. A solitary problem exists in finding those seeds. The best way to locate a supplier is to do an internet search of this plant. I accidentally came across it and became captivated by the descriptive beauty of these flowers and the guarantee that the neighborhood hummingbirds would flock to the plants throughout the summer. It's true! I had plenty of these excited avian visitors during this time. Even they thought this was a novel plant to quench their thirst for nectar.

This plant enjoys the requirements of fertile, well-drained soil and plenty of sunlight. Although it grows best in a bedding or border location, the next best situation is raising it in containers—which I did — but my plants grew less tall but remained bushy. Mature plants in warmer climates can reach from three to five feet. That is something worth seeing and admiring!

Potted plants will regrow from the woody stems by late spring if protected from freezing conditions over the winter. If transplanted to a larger pot or in a bed, you can be assured of a larger display of these intriguing, colorful blossoms throughout the summer.

Pimpernel – Blue Pimpernel; Italian Pimpernel

Anagallis monellii “Skylover”



In 1905, Baroness Emma Orczy (her full name was Emma Magdalena Rozália Mária Jozefa Borbála Orczy de Orci — (yikes, no wonder she shortened it) wrote and published a historical book about the Reign of Terror at the start of the French Revolution entitled *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

The main character, a flamboyant Englishman named Sir Percy Blakeney, acts like a Zorro superhero by rescuing people sentenced to death via “Madam Guillotine.” He is a master of disguise and escapes death-defying encounters.

He adopts a red flower, *Anagallis arvensis*, better known as a scarlet pimpernel, as his secret identity “nickname” — just like Spiderman, the Green Hornet, and Batman are today. Sir Percy would have made a bigger or more powerful statement of his hero status if he had used *Anagallis monellii* or the **Blue Pimpernel** instead.

This plant is a traffic-stopper in full bloom, with hundreds of intense, ultra-true-blue flowers for the entire summer. A native of the Mediterranean region, we can classify it as a maintenance-free plant, for it can grow well in dry, sunny locations. It would appreciate some fertile, well-drained soil with an occasional watering for better growth and bloom, but don't fuss over it.

Look for the “**Skylover Blue**” variety (an ideal name!), which grows only a foot tall, branches off in all directions, and makes a good border edging and outstanding container plant. If only it were hardy—only to Zone 9—but it is an annual in most gardens.

All superheroes have minor character flaws; this prolific bloomer is no exception. Like its close cousin *Anagallis arvensis* mentioned above, both species close their petals at dusk, when the day is cloudy, or when a thunderstorm nears. Both species have the common nickname of Poor Man's Barometer. These plants prefer to bask in the bright sunlight. Then again, don't we all?

Plumbago – Leadwort; Cape Plumbago or Sky Flower Shrub

Plumbago auriculata “Imperial Blue”



Native to South Africa, those of you living in the southernmost areas of the USA will already know about this plant. Hardy, from zones 9 and up, it grows (and blooms) non-stop in warm-to-hot climate environments.

Although classified as a woody shrub, it can act as a vine, but you need to train it to be one. It does not twine upward but forms expanding branches that can extend along the ground as a ground cover, partially cascade over a wall, or grow upward (with help) by being attached to any support, such as a trellis.

For most of us, it can only be grown in a container as an annual. Even so, it will bloom all summer from semi-woody young plants transplanted in late spring.

When admiring its flowers, you will understand why this plant has the common name of Sky Flower. They appear as if the Phlox-like petals absorbed some of the blueness from the sky. The blue is absolutely gorgeous to the point of being an addiction to constant admiration. Try to find the “**Imperial Blue**” variety, which has larger flowers than the species. Other forms (more rare) are available, having white or pink flowers.

Grow it in sunlight and fertile, well-drained soil for the best-blooming potential. This plant can tolerate periodic dry soil, so you need not fuss over it. Don't we wish all plants were like this? For containers, try to plant them in a size larger than you originally planned to use. It's like buying a larger shoe size for a growing child.

By fall, before a killing freeze, if possible, transfer the container indoors (such as a cool, dark area of the basement) and allow the woody plant to begin dormancy. The soil should remain dry, but occasionally, give the plant some water to keep the roots alive. By spring, depending on your climate zone, transfer to a bright area and begin regular watering. You should then expect a larger blooming plant throughout the summer.

You may wonder why the “regular” common name is called Leadwort. It was once thought that the plants (possibly the flowers) could cure lead poisoning. Please don't count on that therapy, but it is recommended to avoid handling the plants, for they release a toxic substance resulting in a severe skin rash reaction. Some people wear gloves or wash their hands immediately afterward when planting the plants.

Once planted in the ground or a container, this plant can be considered low-maintenance, so relax and gaze at those outstanding blue blossoms. You may have trouble averting your eyes!

**Ptilotus – Pink Mulla Mulla; Lambs
Tails; Pink Pussy Tails; 'Joey'
Ptilotus exaltatus “Joey Improved”**



Who could not resist growing an Australian native flower named “Pink Mulla Mulla”? Well, I couldn’t, and I am glad I grew it. My sister also fell in love with it and wishes to grow it yearly. I photographed my potted plants for this ebook cover to honor this newly offered plant.

There are several ways to describe the flower head of this unique annual. Including the above common names, you could describe it as Pink Cat Tails, Pink Spruce Trees, Pink Pinecones, or, as my sister crudely remarked (jokingly), Pink Toilet Brushes. Older gardeners may also call it Pink Bottle-Brushes. Does anyone use this tool anymore?

Anyway, when viewed up close, those eye-catching, if not unbelievable, four-inch-long flower heads are composed of several tiny tubular flowers with vivid neon-pink ends. They separate each other with whitish woolly, fuzzy, fluffy, or spiderweb-ish fibers. The cottony effect looks gray or pale purple in bright sunlight punctuated with laser-like pink dots. The green leaves eventually form reddish stems topped with those conical, if not comical, flower heads.

I hope I conveyed this description adequately to you. If not, zoom in on the above and cover photos. Even the honeybees and smaller bumblebees were confused about these flowers. They eventually liked them, for they constantly sipped the nectar all summer and into the fall.

This plant grows in central Australia's hot and arid regions and, surprisingly, is related to Celosia, described earlier. Although it grows as a perennial there, it is more of an annual for most gardens elsewhere.

The plants need full sunlight to grow and bloom well for all container and bedding purposes, and the soil must be exceptionally well-drained. The plants thrive in occasional forgetfulness in watering but will perish in constantly watered soil. As for fertilization, incorporate some time-released granules into the potting or bedding soil.

Look for the variety called "**Joey Improved.**" This plant is very low-maintenance, for you do not have to trim back any side shoots or spent flowers; they keep growing from the top of each cone-shaped flower head while the bottom actually "spent" blossoms blend in with all the other clusters of flowers. Allow the flower heads to keep growing and, hopefully, form seeds.

As a floral newcomer to most gardeners (when writing this ebook), the seeds are expensive and have a low germination rate. Breeders are currently working on improving those two problems. I purchased ten seeds for a dollar each (I never did that before!) and planted them directly in a 12-inch diameter plastic pot. I had the good fortune of eight seeds germinating within a few days. Not knowing how far to space them out, I left them alone, and they filled the pot wonderfully. The plants grew slightly over a foot tall when mature and were bushy.

This annual is perfect for growing if you wish to impress the know-it-all garden club members or competitive neighbors. They won't know how to react to these unusual flowers and will be persistent in questioning you about them. Just smile and keep them curious. You have finally earned some praise and respect.

Rose – Miniature Roses

Rose hybrida



While most plants in this publication are long-blooming annuals, pay attention to these woody and hardy floriferous garden favorites — even if they are short in stature. Miniature roses are nothing more than regular hybrid tea or shrub roses genetically determined to be smaller.

They have similar flower colors, green leaves, and stems with a well-distributed root system but only in a petite size. Some varieties retain a slight fragrance, though their larger relations are stronger scented. Being so, they make outstanding container subjects for any deck or patio. They make an even more fabulous visual impact when growing in a bed or border; their roots can roam free here.

Breeders developed hundreds of varieties with various flower colors over several years. Still, they all have clusters of blossoms in common instead of individual ones on a single stem — like that of hybrid tea varieties.

The plants are remarkably hardy; the average is Zone 4, and the plants can grow from one to three feet and be very bushy. There is always a downside to everything, including these roses, for they, like their larger relations, are still susceptible to various viral, bacterial, and fungal diseases (like Black Spot) and insect pests.

There is some controversy over when and how mini-roses came to be. It is a matter of discovering and replicating these unique types for future enjoyment. The ancient Chinese possibly cultivated mini-roses, and these plants slowly spread to other lands. That's the theory, for no reliable historical record of this happening exists.

What is recorded happened in 1917 when a Swiss Army Major bred the first mini-rose from a “mutant” plant grown from seeds he sowed in a pot by a sunny windowsill. He and his family kept this plant growing for years afterward, eventually being propagated and hybridized by many other gardeners since then.

Then we have the case of a mini-rose (or more) being discovered or accidentally bred sometime in the 1930s, and the excited hoopla over them began the frenzy of making more varieties. And so, here we are with untold numbers of these roses being sold in garden centers, online nurseries, flower shops, and even the floral aisle in grocery stores. Who can resist buying a six-inch pot of vivid red mini-roses and a few grocery items?

How do you care for these roses? Like all the other plants in this ebook, find a generous-sized container with several drainage holes, fill it with a well-drained potting mix incorporated with time-related fertilizer granules, and a location with many hours of sunlight. There. Then, you wait a few weeks for the abundant blooming to commence.

By mid to late fall, you must decide what to do with your potted roses. If you live in areas with a “warm” winter, you can keep the pot outdoors but try to protect it from the occasional severe cold spell. In super-duper, really cold areas, one good way to protect the rose is to store it in an unheated garage but ensure the pot does not freeze. Keep the garage above freezing, but be vigilant if severe cold is forecasted.

Another alternative is to place it indoors by a sunny window. Here, it will continue to grow and possibly bloom. An unfortunate problem may happen if the container harbors some “critter pests” living in the potting soil or within the leaves.

The difficulty of growing these miniature roses is determining which variety to purchase. There are so many to choose from. Let your eyes (and also allow your nose) find that particular rose. Let’s be honest and go plural — find those attractive roses!

Salvia – Sage

Salvia splendens, elegans, and other species



These popular plants have many annual, perennial, and woody shrub species and varieties, growing from one to six feet tall. Depending on the species or hybrid, most are hardy from Zones 4 and up. They all share standard growth requirements such as sunny, warm-to-hot, and well-drained to dry locations.

There are many varieties, each developing hundreds, no, thousands, of glowing blossoms throughout the summer. Many Salvia flowers have colorful bracts or modified leaves surrounding the actual flowers. These bracts provide contrasting colors, highlighting the flowers even more.

Many species and associated varieties can grow in your garden and in containers. Garden centers and nurseries provide plenty of colorful types for sale in the spring. You can also grow them from seed, but potted plants will give you (and the visiting hummingbirds) a head start in enjoying their blossoms.

You can always begin with the commonly grown bedding species called *Salvia splendens*. This species is always a standout for all its eye-popping red color. Most varieties grow under two feet tall but will bush out to provide outstanding bedding and planter displays.

Another recommended species/variety to grow is the Honeydew Melon Sage (*Salvia elegans*). It is an excellent annual, having a beautiful cantaloupe melon perfume when you rub the leaves. It is a perfect plant for bedding and containers, showcasing their bright, red, tubular flowers. Most annual species and varieties will produce more flowers in warmer southern climates.

Scaevola – Fanflower

Scaevola aemula



If you are looking for a low-maintenance, long-blooming, colorful, and “unusually constructed” annual, Australian native *Scaevola* is sure to please. Its odd Fanflower nickname is accurate, for it does not display the typical rounded flower shape. All five petals are arranged in a two-dimensional arrangement like that of a hand-held paper fan.

Another unusual display is the plant growing more horizontally than vertically. The constant blooming shoots extend outward but only grow a foot upward. The effect is gorgeous in any planter or container. Still, contrary to other reviewers, I think it looks weird in a hanging basket since the shoots sag slightly and don’t cascade downward. If you prefer

a less sprawly plant, you can always clip the ends to encourage “fuller” horizontal growth.

Fanflowers prefer to grow in plenty of sunlight and the usual fertile, well-drained soil but tolerate hot locations and occasional drought conditions without showing excessive wilting stress. But maintain the occasional watering for more reliable constant summer blooming, especially in containers.

The flower colors range from an eye-popping blueish-purple to cotton candy pink and white. All three colors perfectly complement each other.

Seeds are sometimes offered for sale, but they take ages to germinate (long dormancy) and slowly develop into blooming adulthood.

Fortunately, more and more garden centers offer young plants each spring. So, make sure you buy several for your planters and containers, beds, and border plantings. I guarantee you will fall in love with this outstanding annual, just like the bees and butterflies have!

Strobilanthes – Persian Shield

Strobilanthes dyerianus



Native to Myanmar (not Persia — someone did not know where they were, apparently), this tropical plant has dark green veins, while the leaves are glowing or shimmering blue and iridescent purple. If you grow this plant in fertile, well-drained soil in a partly sunny location, expect to be overwhelmed by the sheer intensity of this coloration. It is just the ticket to transform a bed, border, or container into sheer astonishment.

Have I made myself clear in pleasantly warning you of what to expect from this leafy plant? Good. I want you to experience “the unexpectedness” of growing and enjoying this leafy class act. It constantly grows more amazingly colorful leaves all summer.

The keyword is vegetative, for, in most gardens, it will only bloom if your garden enjoys late fall and winter warmth. I am still determining the flowers' appearance since they never bloom for me. Oh well, bring a potted plant indoors by fall and keep it growing. Maybe by the winter, you will witness its blooming. Hey, something to look forward to!

Nurseries do not grow these plants from seed but from softwood cuttings stuck in pots. Because of this propagation method, their cost will be higher but not excessively expensive. If you enjoy growing and admiring them and wish to have more of them to grow next summer, learn how to take cuttings yourself in the fall and overwinter them indoors. Imagine a large border of these plants thriving next year!

Being tropical, these plants can tolerate wet soil (for a while) but prefer moist, well-drained, fertile loam. Their best leaf coloration occurs when grown in partly sunny locations but avoid constant sun or total shade exposure.

If you grow Coleus plants, treat these plants like them. They can grow tall, so periodically pinch back the growing shoots to induce plenty of branching side shoots. They look great in a garden setting and make splendid container plantings. What more can we ask for?

Tagetes – Marigold

Tagetes patula and *Tagetes erecta*



Long-time experienced gardeners will roll their eyes by reacting to my decision to include these annuals. Any newbie gardener will gladly add them to a low-maintenance garden, roomy planter, or container. Well, why not? These plants are cheap in garden centers and provide abundant blooms all summer and fall. What more can any gardener ask for?

Marigolds are among the easiest annual flowers to grow and raise — especially for children and us child-like adults. The large, tall African Marigolds (*Tagetes erecta*) are available for you to grow along with the smaller-flowered and shorter-growing French Marigolds (*Tagetes patula*.) Strangely, all these plants are native to Mexico — go figure!

The French varieties are the better choice for planting in containers. They are lower-growing and provide an abundance of single to double blossoms all season long, with colors ranging from brick red to orange, gold, yellow, bicolors, and even some eye-catching tricolors.

The African types may provide you with complications of falling over, especially during windy weather. You can grow them, but use larger, heavier, and broader base planters or pots. The petite French types are your best bet in any pot or planter, for they don't get too tall and form a mound shape of constant bloom.

All Marigolds prefer plenty of sunlight and well-drained soil. Any consistently wet ground will rot the roots and stems. They can tolerate less-than-fertile soil, but giving them a light feeding over the summer would be beneficial. They can go several days without water, but if no rain is in sight, take the time to give them a quenching drink.

You can consider them low-maintenance, but the occasional clipping off of spent flower heads will provide more future blooms and a better overall appearance.

Thunbergia – Black-eyed Susan Vine

Thunbergia alata



Named in honor of Swedish botanist Carl Peter Thunberg (1743-1828), this vine is native to regions of eastern and southern Africa.

Before describing this vine, I must issue a public service announcement stating, “*This vine is not associated with or related to Rudbeckia hirta, a short-lived perennial in the Daisy family called Black-eyed Susan.*” This confusion is a prime example of why scientific Latin names are essential in distinguishing actual identification from familiar names. Okay, lesson learned, and time to move on.

The five-petaled flowers are bright orange, but some varieties are golden yellow, reddish-orange, or white. All types sport a darkened

center of black to a dark brown, which inspires the common name. Sometimes, the common name should be the “Brown-eyed Girl” vine.

The vines bloom throughout the summer to fall until a killing frost. They display extensive dark green, heart-shaped leaves; the stems can grow to 10 feet or more on a supporting structure, such as a trellis. It can flourish in containers if supported with bamboo or any upright frame. Allow the vines to cascade from hanging baskets for a more pleasing display.

Being tropical, they are hardy only to zones 9 to 10. Everywhere else, it is an annual. Plant this enjoyable vine in sunny, fertile, and well-drained areas.

Seeds and established plants are available in many garden centers and online.

Trachelospermum – Star Jasmine or Confederate Jasmine

Trachelospermum jasminoides



Remember the old expression, “If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it must be a duck?” Well, this expression applies to this plant. If it looks like Jasmine, grows like Jasmine, and smells like Jasmine, then it must be Jasmine. Sorry, no jasmine here.

As any gardener knows, Jasmine takes on many names, for it is easy to remember. Tack on an extra descriptive word, and you are good to go in enjoying the flowers. Trachelospermum ‘doesn’t cut it’ as a memorable name; it sounds like a respiratory disease or ailment.

Another misconception concerning this plant is the common name, Confederate Jasmine, which confuses gardeners into thinking the vine is native to the southern Dixie areas of the United States. It is not native but grows there. The Confederate name is associated with the Federation of Malay States – native countries of this vine.

OK. Let's bypass this confusing information and get to the nitty-gritty facts about this plant. Gardeners living in zones 8 to 10 can grow this as a fragrant climbing vine – shrub – hedge – groundcover or container plant. For goodness' sake, which one? You can grow this vine as “all the above.”

For a vine, plant it by a fence or trellis and allow it to twine itself upward to an average height of 12 feet. Change your mind and want a fragrant hedge? Clip the tops and side shoots. Want a groundcover? Let it flop and grow, but it's difficult to appreciate the blossoms that way unless you walk around like a dog.

For cold-climate gardeners, the best recourse is to raise this plant in a container and train the vines upward on bamboo stakes or cascade from a hanging basket.

This plant has dark, glossy green leaves and abundant, scented, star-shaped, or windmill-shaped, pure white flowers. Most of the blooming occurs in the spring, but sporadic flowering happens in summer. It prefers fertile, well-drained soil and as much sunlight as possible.

Tropaeolum – Nasturtium

Tropaeolum majus



One of the easiest-to-grow garden annuals, the Nasturtium is also one of the most vibrant plants available for your garden. The large blossoms are shades of red, rosy pink, yellow, orange, and white. Many have contrasting markings.

Upright-growing varieties will look attractive in most containers, but I recommend growing these plants in hanging baskets for eye-catching beauty. Here, the long, trailing stems can cascade downward. But a problem arises — Nasturtiums are notorious for “hiding” their flowers behind their oval leaves. Heavens! How do we solve this perplexing dilemma?

One simple way is to avoid growing these plants in excessively fertile soil. More nitrogen fertilizer will make the plants produce more leaves than flowers. Use regular potting soil for hanging baskets, and some compost and gravel (for better drainage) will be adequate for better flower production. Occasionally, add a weak solution of commercial fertilizer or, better yet, water weekly with “compost tea,” that is, compost steeped in gallons of water.

One variety from seed stores can extend the flower stems farther away from the leaves. The **Alaska Series** has a mixture of floral colors but also highlights white-splotched variegated leaves. Although not a sprawling plant, this variety holds the flowers above the foliage.

Nasturtiums are easy to raise from seed if sown in warm soil and raised after the threat of frost. Garden centers and nurseries rarely offer these annuals since they sometimes do not transplant well when grown in pots. You should be able to find the colors you prefer from seed companies. Hummingbirds prefer the red shades but will settle for whatever blossom colors are available to suckle the nectar.

For those of you who prefer growing “something different” in a hanging basket, another *Tropaeolum* relative with cascading vines and flowers is next.

Tropaeolum – Canary Creeper Vine

Tropaeolum peregrinum



Our common garden nasturtiums are closely related to this vine, but the flowers have a more “exotic look” to them. This vine is only hardy to Zone 9 and higher, so, for most gardeners, it is an annual. Like most annual plants, they quickly grow and bloom from seeds.

To experience seeing beautiful flocks of bright yellow blossoms over the summer, plant them in full sunlight and fertile, well-drained soil. The best way to present these plants is to grow them in hanging baskets or containers at the top of a wall or ledge to allow the flowers to cascade downward.

This vine has a fascinating history but be prepared for mental gymnastics to understand this lesson. Many flower names are tributes to famous botanists (well, celebrated at the time), but this unusual cascading vine is different. Instead of who – it is based on what and where.

The flowers resemble the outstretched, bright yellow wings of a canary. And where do canary birds live? No, not the pet store – but the Canary Islands. Whoa! Hold on now. This vine is native to Peru and Ecuador. Discovered growing near Lima, Peru, in the early 1700s, explorers shipped seeds back to France, had a “layover” in the Canary Islands, and when they arrived and grew in France, the vines took on the Canary name. Someone goofed – big time.

An even bigger mistake occurred on the actual name of these islands. The ancient Romans named these islands *Islas Canarias* or “Islands of the Dogs or Dog Islands.” The English word canary is from the Latin *canarius*, from the root word *canis* (or *canid*), meaning “dog.” Sailors reported seeing large dogs frolicking by the shore.

There may have been large dogs living on the islands brought there by past invaders or explorers, but the most likely explanation is the mistaken identity of large seals as being dogs by those “not-so-bright” sailors. (Are you getting a headache from my geographical language history lesson? I have from typing these sentences.)

To make the island name fiasco worse, native to the islands were small, and yellow songbirds were taken as exotic pets to Europe in the 16th century. They became known as canary birds from the Canary Islands. And the rest is history. Wow, that was a historical workout concerning, of all things, yellow-flowered vines, canary birds, dogs, and seals. When you learn about floral histories, expect the unexpected – especially from reading my ebooks!

Verbena

Verbena hybrida



Verbenas have small, tubular flowers arranged into ball-like clusters produced throughout the summer and fall. Their leaves are dark green, highly resistant to mildew, and exhibit a vigorous spreading or trailing growth habit, so they will be suitable as a ground cover but look more attractive by cascading from a hanging basket. You can also grow them to overflow containers placed on patios, decks, or window boxes.

Many colors are available, but the more noticeable ones are bi-colored, which provide an eye-catching spectacle all season long. Some outstanding varieties will provide you with the added bonus of fragrant flowers. For my nose, the scent resembles *Convalaria* or Lily-of-the-

Valley. Please remember that the scented types are the exception to the rule, for many scentless varieties are usually available.

These popular plants prefer to grow in sunlight to partial shade and fertile, well-drained soil. They can be hardy perennials if you live in Zones 9 to 10, but we must accept them as annuals for most of us. They can be easily propagated by rooted cuttings. However, you can find sections with tiny rootlets pre-forming on the leafy stems.

These outstanding plants are usually considered low-maintenance, but for best floriferous results, it is best to occasionally cut off spent flower clusters and provide regular watering and fertilizing to provide all-summer enjoyment.

Conclusion

I selected the above types based on their exceptionally long blooming, possible rarity, and ease of care. To form other gorgeous displays, you can “pot up” several more annual and some perennial plants not listed above. Try to plant the smaller or dwarf-type varieties, for they will look best growing and blooming in any container.

Creating this ever-blooming spectacle is not simply filling a pot with bagged soil-less mix and plopping in some garden center transplants. There is an “art” to achieving a bountiful and healthy display of any flowering plant.

- Container gardening involves more thought, labor, and management than bed and border gardening. Potted outdoor plants need daily attention. It’s all about the type of plants you raise, their light requirements, the size of the containers, and the quality of the soil-less medium you fill them with.
- Containers come in all sizes, shapes, and constructed materials. Plastic pots are the most common, along with the old standby favorites, the brick-colored clay pots. These are more porous, providing the roots with air but, conversely, allowing more water to escape from the soil. These need more attention to watering.
- Drainage holes are essential for all containers and hanging baskets. Never choose a container without seeing if the bottom has at least one hole to allow excess water to escape. The number of holes should increase with the increased diameter of your container.
- A rule of thumb is the larger the container, the better for plant development and bloom, but there is a trade-off due to weight concerns. Hanging baskets filled with soil can become super heavy, so ensure the attached end supports the weight.

- The soil-less mix does not have true earth-loam. It contains peat moss, vermiculite, perlite, and, possibly, sand, tree bark, and charcoal for added texture, drainage, and fertility. Avoid mixing in clay-based garden soil, which forms a hard substrate (like concrete) when dry.
- Regular soil fertilization is also vital to promote exceptional leafy and flower growth. Depending on your climate, every other watering should include a dilute fertilizer solution. One easy way to maintain proper soil fertility is to add some time-released fertilizer granules into or on the soil surface. This way, your containers and hanging baskets will always have a boost of nutrition at each watering.

Using the above plants adapted to the sunny or shady conditions of where you place a container, you will eventually transform a dull area into an ideal botanical spot to spend many hours of contentment.

Although gardening with containers is more expensive and requires more maintenance than bed or border plantings, you will realize you are closer to the profound beauty of each flower. Isn't it worth every penny and the labor to experience this pleasure each day? Yes, it certainly is.

Thank you for reading this ebook

I hope you have enjoyed this ebook on reviewing colorful and long-blooming annuals that can be planted in any container and hanging basket. Be creative and experience the joy of transforming your outdoor living space into an area of serenity and comfort.

Please visit my author website, <https://gedwinvarner.com> concerning my other gardening ebooks and contact information.

About the Author

G. Edwin Varner grew up on a farm, helping his father in the crop fields and assisting his mother in the flower and vegetable gardens. This experience and learning led him to receive a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology with a minor in Botany.

He successfully owned and operated a fragrant flower mail-order nursery for twenty years. Unlike most mail-order nurseries publishing colorful but expensive pictorial catalogs, his frugal catalog extensively described the flowers he grew. He once said, "I write a thousand words worth a picture in my catalogs." Today, he has the same style of writing (thankfully with fewer words) through a variety of enjoyable and informative ebooks. This time, the ebooks include color photos of each flower.

He encourages you to cultivate something unique and beautiful in your gardens. His motto is "Read about it, see it, grow it, and enjoy it!"

G. Edwin Varner lives in a rural area of northeastern Ohio, USA.