

garden gate readers'

# top 11 pickups

What's *your* favorite annual? We asked our readers to share their favorites, and here they are! Long bloom time, bright colors, easy to grow...that's what you said about these plants, and we couldn't agree more. One or two of these plants are actually tender perennials, but most people grow them as annuals.

In case you're wondering why a couple of old stand-bys, like geraniums, aren't on the list, it's because we narrowed down your answers to annuals that you told us you usually plant in the ground, not in containers.

One of the best things about annuals is that you can find lots of cultivars at local garden centers. Check out the "Try these" boxes at the bottom of each description for a few specific cultivars to look for.

In "From the Test Garden" on p. 48, we'll show you how to care for annuals to get great flowers all summer. You can start any of these from seed indoors, but in our list, I'll let you know if you can direct sow the seeds outdoors or if you're better off buying plants at the garden center. However you get started, you're off to a showy summer! □

— Stephanie Polsley Bruner



## Marigold

*Tagetes* spp.

Even if you don't like the smell of marigolds (although I do!), you have to love the nonstop color. Plants can be 6 or 8 inches tall (like 'Janie Flame' shown here) to 3 feet tall, and flowers can be 1 to 3 inches across.

As long as they're warm enough, marigolds don't need a lot of care. They like full sun, and while they tolerate drought, they'll flower better with plenty of moisture. If marigolds are drought-stressed, you may find spider mites on them — the leaves turn bronze-green and there's webbing on the undersides. Just hose off the plants, then keep them well-watered for the rest of the season.



**Size** 6 to 36 in. tall, 8 to 16 in. wide

**Blooms** Yellow, orange, red, bicolors; single or double

**Getting started** Seeds or plants

**Light** Full sun

**Pests** Occasional spider mites

### Try these

**Huge, clear-yellow flowers:**

'Inca Yellow Hybrid'

**White flowers and no odor:**

'French Vanilla'



**Petunia**  
**Petunia hybrid**

Readers love petunias for their bright colors and spreading habit. They can have single or double flowers, and they come in a range of colors. Small, mounding ones are great in containers, while spreaders like this Wave® Purple, shown here with annual salvia, spill over retaining walls or cover a lot of ground. New cultivars have flowers that stand up to rain and wind better than the old-timers did.

To keep petunias blooming their best, give them plenty of water. You may need to pinch them back a bit if they get straggly, but many of the newer hybrids don't even need that much care.



- Size** 6 to 18 in. tall by 1 to 5 ft. wide
- Blooms** White, pink, red, purple, blue; may have striped petals or contrasting veins; large or small flowers; double or single forms
- Getting started** Plants
- Light** Full sun
- Pests** Occasional aphids or slugs

**Try these**

- Pink with a white eye:** Easy Wave® Rosy Dawn
- Bright colors with white stripes:** 'Razzle Dazzle' hybrid mix



**Zinnia**  
**Zinnia hybrid**

Most of us planted a pack of zinnia seeds as kids. And we never outgrew these sizzling bright colors. 'State Fair Mix', planted with statice in the photo above, is a classic.

Some zinnias have rounded, ball-shaped blooms (dahlia-flowered), while others have spiky petals (cactus-flowered).

Upright zinnias can be 3 to 4 feet tall with blooms 4 or 5 inches across, while spreading, ground cover types, like the 'Profusion' series, grow only a foot tall.

You're not the only one in the garden who likes zinnias. Butterflies love 'em! They're also a great cut flower — the more you pick, the better the plants branch.



- Size** 10 to 48 in. tall by 6 to 18 in. wide
- Blooms** Any color but blue; may be spotted or streaked; double or single
- Getting started** Seeds or plants
- Light** Full sun
- Pests** Powdery mildew in mid- to late summer

**Try these**

- Unusual flower shape:** 'Red Spider'
- Eye-catching red-and-yellow blooms:** 'Old Mexico'



**Snapdragon**  
*Antirrhinum* hybrid

Greet the spring with these cool-season beauties. In USDA zone 7 and warmer, snapdragons are often planted in fall so they'll bloom in the spring, then they're removed to make way for summer annuals. But in colder gardens, you can plant them either in early spring for cool-weather color or in late summer to enjoy fall blooms.

I like the short ones best, like 'Chimes Yellow' above, because they stand up without staking. But you can stake the taller ones, and they make beautiful cut flowers. Some new trailing snapdragons are available, and they're a bit more heat-tolerant than other snaps.



- Size** 6 to 36 in. tall by 8 to 12 in. wide
- Blooms** Yellow, peach, orange, burgundy, red, pink, white, bicolor; most are single, a few are double
- Getting started** Plants
- Light** Full sun to part shade
- Pests** Rust may be a problem in hot weather

**Try these**

- Trailing:** Lampion Mix
- Dark-red flowers:** 'Black Prince'
- Tall, white spikes:** 'Royal Bride'

**Spider flower**  
*Cleome hassleriana*

It may be called spider flower, but I think these blooms look like fireworks. Either way, the plants attract hummingbirds and butterflies to your garden. The only drawback? To most people, they smell like a skunk, but it's only noticeable if you're very close or handling the foliage.

Spider flower's stems can look ratty at the base, so plant something shorter in front, like the red celosia with the 'Sparkler White' spider flower in the photo.

Reseeding can be a bit of a problem, but the little seedlings are easy to pull. Or snip off the seed pods as they form along the stem to keep the plant from reseeding.



- Size** 18 to 48 in. tall by 12 to 36 in. wide
- Blooms** White, pink, purple; bicolor
- Getting started** Seeds or plants
- Light** Full sun
- Pests** None serious

**Try these**

- Short, 18-in. plants:** 'White Spider'
- Pink-and-white flowers:** 'Sparkler Blush'



**Nicotiana**  
**Nicotiana hybrid**

They're sometimes called flowering tobacco, but there's nothing smoky about these flowers. This is an old cottage garden favorite, but new, shorter hybrids with showier flowers, like 'Apple Blossom' in the photo, work in any garden. Nicotiana can be very fragrant, but some new cultivars have been bred for looks, not fragrance. If you want the sweet scent, check the tags to be sure you're getting one that smells good. Hummingbirds flock to nicotiana flowers, too.

In areas with cool summers, nicotiana likes full sun, but in USDA zone 6 and warmer, it does better with afternoon shade.



- Size** 12 to 36 in. tall by 12 to 24 in. wide
- Blooms** White, yellow, pink, red, purple, green
- Getting started** Seeds or plants
- Light** Full sun
- Pests** Occasional aphids

**Try these**

**Sweet scent and dark-purple flowers:** 'Perfume Deep Purple'  
**Pink petals with lime-green backs:** 'Tinkerbelle'

**Impatiens**  
**Impatiens walleriana**

These may be the most popular annuals in the world — and also with our readers!

Plant them among hostas for summer color, or grow them in containers on the patio. You'll find mixes, like the 'Super Elfin' mix in the photo, or single colors. Some are double, looking almost like miniature roses. They aren't fragrant, but they're so pretty that it doesn't really matter much.

Impatiens are slow to get started in cool spring weather, so plant them a little later than most annuals. I keep a couple of old sheets handy to cover mine in case of a light frost in early fall as they're very sensitive to cold.



- Size** 6 to 18 in. tall and wide
- Blooms** White, pink, purple, red, orange; bicolors; picotee edges; singles and doubles
- Getting started** Plants
- Light** Part shade
- Pests** Occasional slugs

**Try these**

**Double flowers:** Fiesta™ series  
**Light-pink flowers with dark-pink edge:** Dazzler® Rose Swirl



**Cosmos**

**Cosmos spp.**

Nothing looks as airy as a planting of cosmos. And boy, can they bloom!

In fact, they may bloom so heavily that the plants start to fade. If that happens, just sow some more seed in midsummer to keep the show going.

Sulfur cosmos has yellow, orange or red flowers in 1- to 2-foot-tall plants, like 'Polidor' in the main photo. Tall cosmos comes in shades of white, pink and burgundy, and the plants are usually 3 to 4 feet tall. (That's 'Seashell' in the small inset photo.) Both types are often sold as color mixes.

Plant cosmos in clumps for a really dramatic look. Those wiry stems make great cut flowers.



**Size** 1 to 4 ft. tall by 1 to 2 ft. wide

**Blooms** White, pink, burgundy, orange, red, yellow; picotee edges; rolled petals

**Getting started** Seeds or plants

**Light** Full sun

**Pests** None serious

**Try these**

**Double flowers, color mix:**

'Double Click' tall cosmos

**Bright orange-red flowers:**

'Dwarf Ladybird Scarlet' sulfur cosmos

**Globe amaranth**

**Gomphrena spp.**

I love unusual flowers, and these balls of color are certainly unique.

'Strawberry Fields', above, is a little taller than most globe amaranth, at 18 to 24 inches. Other hybrids, like 'Bicolor Rose', tend to be a bit smaller. But other than that, all globe amaranths have the same papery, long-lasting blossoms.

And speaking of papery blossoms, those aren't petals, they're bracts. (The true flowers are tiny and yellow — you might not even notice them.) Globe amaranth dries well, like most papery flowers. Cut the blooms when they've just opened, and hang them in a dry, shady place.



**Size** 6 to 24 in. tall by 6 to 12 in. wide

**Blooms** White, pink, purple, lavender, red

**Getting started** Seeds or plants

**Light** Full sun

**Pests** None serious

**Try these**

**Pale lavender flowers, darker at the tips:** 'Lavender Queen'

**6-in.-tall plants:** 'Gnome Purple'



## Lantana

### *Lantana camara*

Great for hot summers, lantana not only stands up to heat, but thrives in it. This is the plant you'll want in your garden in August when everything else is drooping. (And it'll be surrounded by butterflies, too.)

See how 'Confetti' lantana in the photo has two colors in the same flower cluster? That's common with lantanas — often the blooms are one color in bud, then they change to another as they age.

This is a tender perennial. (You can keep it over the winter in a container.) Where lantana is hardy, it's a woody shrub, but if you're growing it as an annual in a cooler area, it won't get quite so big.



- Size** 1 to 6 ft. tall by 2 to 8 ft. wide
- Blooms** White, yellow, pink, orange, red; many have multiple colors in a single flower
- Getting started** Plants
- Light** Full sun
- Pests** None serious

#### Try these

**Solid-yellow flowers:** 'Sonshine'  
**Bright-red flowers, hardier than most:** 'Miss Huff'  
**Pastel pinks and yellows:** 'Tropical Fruit'

## Tall verbena

### *Verbena bonariensis*

Looking for an airy "filler" plant? Look no further! This verbena is cold-hardy to USDA zone 7, but elsewhere, it reseeds happily. You can pinch off or cut back the flowers as they fade, before the plant sets seed. Or just pull the unwanted seedlings in spring.

My favorite thing about this verbena is that when it comes up in my flower bed next spring, it never comes up quite where it was before. It often creates beautiful combinations that I wouldn't have considered. I like it at the back of the flower border, where it weaves up through other plants. (And they'll help cover the bare verbena stems.)



- Size** 3 to 5 ft. tall by 1 to 2 ft. wide
- Blooms** Lavender
- Getting started** Seeds or plants
- Light** Full sun
- Pests** None serious

#### Try these

**Shorter verbena hybrid:** 'Homestead Purple'  
**Spike-shaped flowers:** Blue vervain (*Verbena hastata*)