



Cool Season Annuals

After a long Chicago winter, gardeners are understandably anxious to punch up the color in their gardens. With the possibility of chilly weather, and even frost through late May, though, it might be best to wait a little longer before planting those tender begonias and impatiens. Even if coddled and covered, they will languish until the temperatures get warmer. Consider instead these annuals that prefer the cool spring weather.



Pansies and violas are probably the cold hardiest annuals, capable of withstanding late spring frosts. Available in almost every color of the rainbow, and blotched, whiskered, bi-colored or plain, there is a pansy or viola to satisfy any taste, and their low-growing habit makes them perfect candidates for containers.

Combine your pansies with some dainty sweet alyssum for a cheery, fragrant addition to a porch or deck. Alyssum is a great choice for garden edging too. Shear it back after its first flush of flowers for more blooms.

For more fragrance, plant some delicate sweet peas--the annual varieties have a heavenly scent. There are clumping types for the border as well as trailing/climbing varieties that look wonderful spilling over the edges of a window box or hanging basket. Sugar N Spice is a compact mix of soft pastel pink and lavender, perfect for a hanging basket by the front door where its sweet scent can be enjoyed.

Stocks are known for their spicy fragrance. Available in vibrant shades of pink, white, rose and purple, their spike-like blooms are good for cutting, and they add an old-fashioned, country look to mixed containers or to the border.

With their colorful, showy spikes, snapdragons are a great pick for vertical interest. Their long-lasting blooms are great for cutting, too, and they come in just about any color except blue, and in dwarf, medium and tall varieties.

Lobelia is a favorite spring annual for shade or part shade. Always striking in brilliant shades of purple, blue and white, their mounding, trailing habit makes them look gorgeous in baskets or window boxes.

Brachycome, or Swan River Daisy, is a member of the Aster family, and similar to its relatives, it has daisy-like flowers with bright yellow centers. Flowers are blue, violet, yellow, rose or white. It has feathery, fern-like foliage and a spreading, trailing habit that makes it ideal for almost any container.



English Daisy, or Bellis, brings a delicate, old-fashioned look to the cool season garden, with diminutive, rounded flower heads in shades of pink, red or white, over spoon-shaped foliage. Growing only about six to twelve inches tall, it looks equally sweet edging a border, planted among spring-flowering bulbs or added to patio pots.

Annual and biennial types of Dianthus, such as China Pinks or Sweet Williams are pretty choices for containers or borders. The serrated flowers come in bright, cheery shades of pink, red and purple, and often have striking, white contrasting markings and edges as well. As an added benefit, if some of the plants are let go to seed, they will likely come back to grace the garden for several more seasons to come.

Those who favor an English garden look might want to add some nasturtiums to the mix. Easy to grow from seed, they can also be purchased as plants. Their brilliant colors and low-growing habit makes them a perfect choice for baskets or around the edges of containers. Nasturtiums have pretty, scalloped, sometimes variegated foliage, too, and their habit can be trailing or mounding. Both flowers and leaves are edible and make a tasty addition to salads.

Calendula, or pot marigold, has showy flowers in marigold-like shades of yellow, orange, apricot and creamy white, and lends a cheery, informal look to the border or containers. Like nasturtium, pot marigold flowers make a pretty garnish for salads, though their flavor is somewhat bitter.

Those preferring softer shades should consider adding some lavender, coral or pink Diascia (Twinspur) to a container. The delicate flowers and airy foliage on this pretty annual look lovely intermingled with other annuals in mixed containers.

Nemesia, with its sweet, two-lipped flowers, is also a charming addition to patio pots. Plants grow about six to twelve inches tall, are available in a wide array of brilliant colors to fit all tastes, and the flowers are self-cleaning.

Osteospermum, sometimes known as African Daisy, is another annual that prefers the cooler days of spring. Grow it for its showy daisy-like flowers with contrasting, often iridescent centers. Depending on the variety, plants may be trailing or mounding, and all are versatile in containers or baskets.

California poppies, traditionally available in yellows or oranges, are now being bred in a much broader color palette, including brilliant shades of pink and red, with lovely, ferny foliage. Twister is a new mix of unique swirled flowers in soft pastel shades. Plant these poppies in full sun in an area with good drainage.

One final note: although these plants enjoy cooler temperatures, and will bloom and grow well at this time, they may not be able to withstand a frost, so be prepared to transport them to a sheltered location or to cover them if a frost is predicted.



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