

The background of the image is a lush, colorful garden filled with various annual flowers. In the foreground, there are clusters of pink, red, and white cosmos flowers. Behind them, tall spikes of blue and purple salvia rise above orange and yellow zinnia flowers. The garden extends into the distance, creating a soft, out-of-focus effect.

The Gardener's Journey: From Vision to Vibrant Blooms

A Complete Guide to Growing Annual Flowers

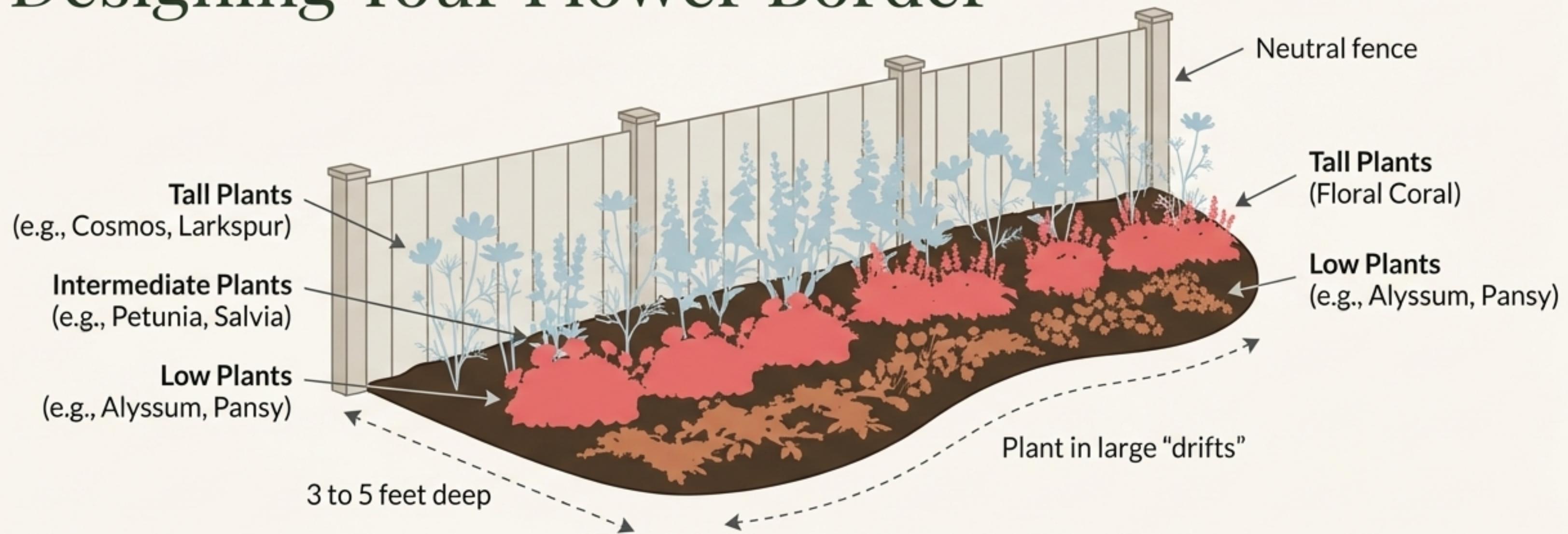
The Unmatched Power of Annuals

Annual flowers solve many landscape problems. No other plants provide such continuous bloom. They are the ultimate tool for the creative gardener:

- Season-Long Color: Fill voids in permanent plantings and provide inexpensive, vibrant color.
- Perfect Partners: Continue interest in perennial beds after early bulbs like tulips and daffodils have faded.
- Abundant Bouquets: Ideal for creating a dedicated cutting garden that doesn't deplete your main landscape.



Designing Your Flower Border



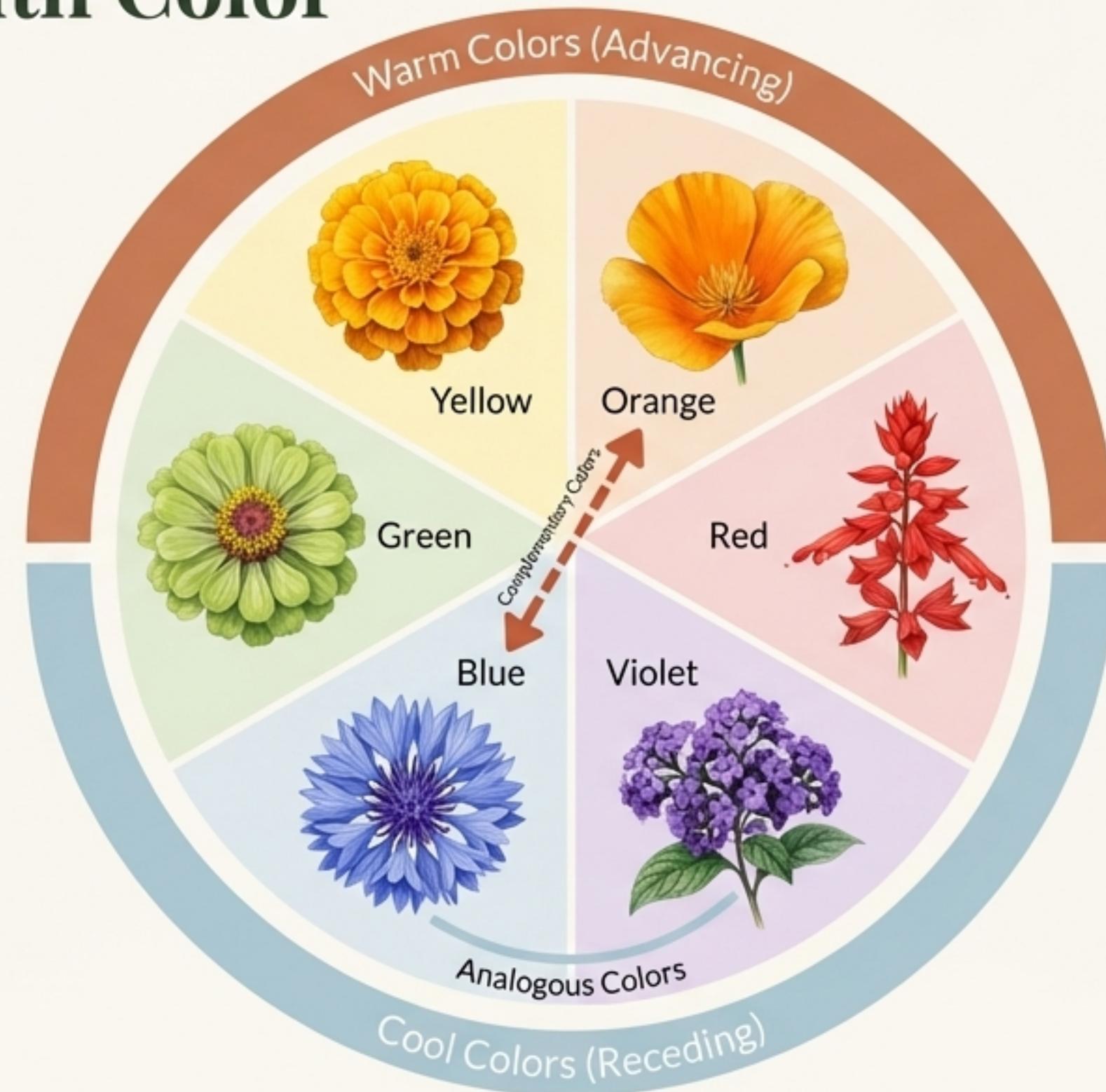
- **Create Flow:** Use curved bed lines for informal plantings. Plant in large “drifts” that melt into each other.
- **Graduate Heights:** Place tall plants in the back, intermediate in the middle, and low plants in the front.
- **Ensure Access:** Make beds 3 to 5 feet deep. For deeper beds, add stepping stones for access.
- **Provide a Backdrop:** Borders are most attractive against a neutral fence or a background of shrubs.

Part 1: The Vision

Composing with Color

Create a Mood:

- **Warm Colors** (Red, Orange, Yellow) create excitement and draw attention. Use them in smaller masses to subordinate them.
- **Cool Colors** (Blue, Violet, Green) create a relaxing, serene feel. Use them in larger masses for balance.



Build Your Palette:

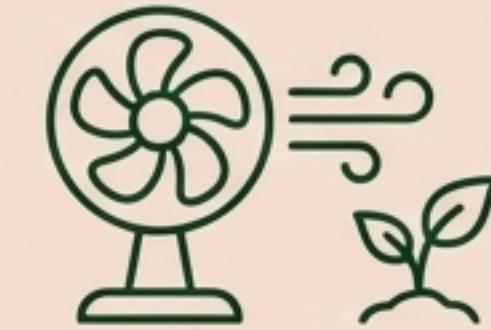
- **Complementary Colors** (opposite on the wheel) produce strong, vibrant contrast.
- **Analogous Colors** (adjacent on the wheel) create subtle, harmonious transitions.

Part 2: The Foundation

Starting Seeds Indoors for a Head Start

Many annuals perform better when started indoors and transplanted. Timing is everything.

- **Don't Plant Too Early:** This is a common mistake that results in oversized, "leggy" transplants susceptible to disease.
- **Coordinate with Your Climate:** Check the average date of the last frost.
 - Western Montana: Sow around April 1 for a June 1 last frost.
 - Eastern Montana: Sow around March 15.
- **Prevent Legginess:** Leggy growth is caused by low indoor light and/or temperatures that are too high.



PRO TIP: Create Stocky Seedlings

Let an electric fan blow air gently across your seedlings. The movement strengthens their stems and helps form compact, sturdy plants.

Part 2: The Foundation

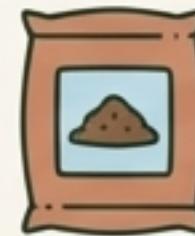
The Recipe for Germination

Choose Your Mix



DIY Soil Mix: 50% loam soil, 25% peat moss, 25% washed sand.

Must be sterilized: place moist mix in a 180°F oven for 30 minutes.



Soiless Mix: A commercial mix of peat moss and perlite. **Usually needs no sterilization.**

Sowing & Care



Prepare: Screen the mix to a fine texture, fill trays, firm, and moisten *before* planting.



Sow: Scatter small seeds and cover with mix to a depth of twice their diameter. **Label everything!**



Water: Water from the bottom by placing containers in a shallow tray of water to avoid dislodging seeds.



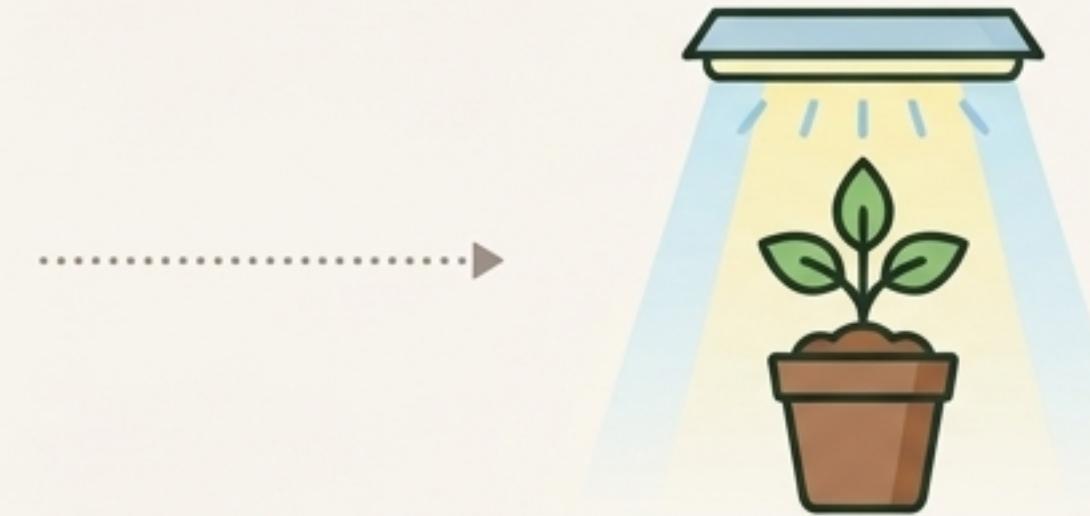
Cover: Use a plastic sheet to maintain humidity.

Temperature Matters

- **General Germination:** 50°F to 80°F.
- **Prefer Warmth (70°-80°F):** Spider Flower (Cleome), Petunia.
- **Prefer Cool:** African Daisy, Candytuft, Bachelor Button, Larkspur.

Part 2: The Foundation

From Seedling to Garden-Ready



1. Transplant

When seedlings have reached the 2-3 leaf stage, move them to individual containers like peat pots or styrofoam cups (with drainage holes).

2. Nurture

Place transplants in a greenhouse, hot bed, or a bright south-facing window. Supplement with "grow" lights if needed.

3. Harden Off (The Critical Step)

Before planting in the garden, you must acclimate your plants. Over a 1 to 2 week period, gradually expose them to cooler nights and outdoor conditions.

Preparing the Canvas and Setting Out Plants



Enrich the Soil

- **Fertilizer:** Work in a complete fertilizer like 5-10-10 at a rate of 5 pounds per 100 square feet.
- **Organic Matter:** Improve soil structure by working in peat moss or well-decayed manure.
- **Soil pH:** Aim for a range between 6.5 and 7.5.

Planting with Care

- **Timing:** Plant late in the afternoon or on a cloudy day when soil is moist to reduce transplant shock.
- **Spacing:** Follow species guidelines. Giant Zinnias need 18 inches, while Alyssum only needs 6.
- **Thinning:** If you direct-seeded, you must thin seedlings before they become crowded to avoid spindly plants with few flowers.

Part 3: The Creation

Tending Your Garden for a Season of Color



Water

Water deeply and infrequently, ensuring the top 6 inches of soil are moist. Use drip irrigation to protect blooms.



Mulch

A fine bark mulch decreases weeds, conserves moisture, and lowers high summer soil temperatures.



Feed

Fertilize weekly with a water-soluble fertilizer for continuous development.

PRO TIP: The Power of Deadheading

Remove spent blossoms ("deadhead") regularly. This prevents the plant from setting seed and forces it to produce a longer, more continuous bloom period.

PRO TIP: The Art of Pinching

Pinching the growing tips of certain annuals creates a stockier, bushier plant with more blooms.

DO PINCH: Ageratum, Petunia, Snapdragon, Zinnia, Salpiglossis, Phlox.
DO NOT PINCH: Impatiens, Cockscomb, Poppies, Stocks, Everlastings.

Part 3: The Creation

The Cycle of Renewal

Fall Clean-Up: Prepare for Next Season



After the first fall freeze, remove all annual plants. This reduces the chance that disease organisms will carry over to the next year. Till the soil to remove weeds and add more organic matter if needed.

Annuals That Reseed: The Garden That Plants Itself



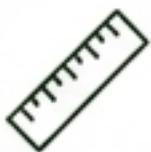
Some species will reseed themselves for next year. If you want this to happen, leave the plants in place until their seeds have shed.

Cosmos, California Poppy, Petunia, Sweet Alyssum, Cornflower, Larkspur, Spider Flower

Part 4: The Gallery

A Showcase of Annuals: Sun Lovers

Zinnia



Height:
18-48"



Use: General,
Cut Flowers



Exposure:
Full Sun

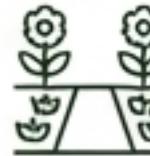


Colors:
Many mixed

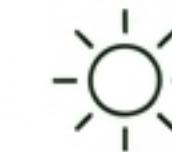
Marigold (French)



Height:
6-36"



Use: General,
Edging



Exposure:
Full Sun



Colors: Yellow,
Orange, Deep Red

Portulaca (Moss Rose)



Height:
4"



Use: Borders, Rock
Gardens, Bare Banks



Exposure:
Full Sun



Colors: Yellow,
Red, White, Pink

Part 4: The Gallery

A Showcase of Annuals: Shade & Partial Shade

Impatiens



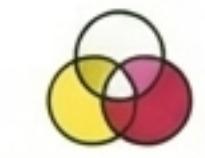
Height:
18"



Use: General,
House Plant



Exposure:
Partial Shade



Colors: White,
Yellow, Red, Pink

Lobelia



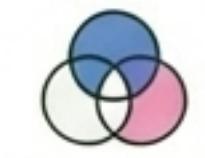
Height:
6-8"



Use: Edging,
Ground Cover



Exposure:
Sun, Partial Shade



Colors: Blue,
White, Pink

Wax Begonia



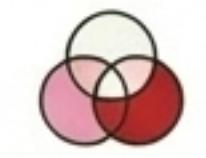
Height:
12-18"



Use: Bedding Plants,
Planters



Exposure:
Partial Shade



Colors: White,
Pink, Red

Continue Your Journey

This gallery is just the beginning. The original guide from Montana State University Extension features a comprehensive table with ornamental and cultural characteristics for **73 common annual flowers**, including details on bloom period, limitations, and propagation.



Access the Complete Guide

www.montana.edu/wwwpb/pubs/mt9501.pdf