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How to Choose the Best Annuals

The secret to picking out annuals for bigger and better blooms.

The garden centers are loaded with rainbow colors of annual flowers. Growers know that color will sell flowers so they feed their annuals with higher doses of phosphorus and potassium to get early bloom on immature plants. Here are a few tips to help you become a smart shopper.

When **picking plants** for your flowers beds, don't be tempted to buy annuals with showy, blooms, pay closer attention to the foliage. The plant should be healthy and vigorous with thick branching stems, dark green foliage (in most cases) and flower buds just starting to show a bit of color. Avoid plants that are either too compact or too spindly. Stay away from yellowing or browning leaves and foliage with spots or brown edges that can be a sign of stress, disease or pests.

In addition, **check the root system** which is just as important. I picked out a flat of begonias at a reputable nursery that had great looking foliage but when it was time to plant, I discovered that the roots were over watered and dying. Needless to say, the plants performed poorly. To check the roots, pop the plant out of its cell pack and inspect the roots; do they fill up the container with a solid white mass or growing out of the bottom of the pot? If so, the plant has been heavily rooted and the roots will need to be trimmed. Is the plant difficult to pop out from the container? Does the soil spill out with the roots? If so, they are under developed and need more time to grow. The best proportion is an even mix of cream colored roots and soil.



Don't be tempted to plant too early. Tender flowers will sit and do nothing if the soil and air temperature are too cold and if a frost hits, then all will be lost. Soil temperatures should be in the 50's for safe planting. Warm weather plants such as impatiens, tomatoes and **peppers** should be planted when all danger of frost has passed and nighttime temperature are above 60F. If you can't plant right away; water and place the container in the suggested light (sun or shade) during the day when temperatures are warm. Bring indoors/garage at night

As difficult as this may sound, **remove the flowers at planting time**, so the plants can focus their energy on more leaf and root production. Also, pinch back any spindly growth to produce bushier plants (except for asters, arctotis and gazania). You will be rewarded with healthier plants and more flowers all season long.