

Fran's Ten Popular Annuals

More correctly this talk should be titled Fran's ten favorite annuals. I grow these every year. My garden is a mixture of sun & shade. So I grow both sun and shade tolerant annuals. Over the years I have either grown most of the common annuals from seed or bought them. I've also grown some that are not so common. Now that I have reached my golden years I look for annuals that will reliably bloom throughout the summer with minimal care.

I define minimal care as watering, deadheading and fertilizing. I use a water soluble fertilizer such as "Miracle-Gro" or 20-20-20 every few weeks. I grow annuals mostly in containers so there is continuous color even where there is no soil to grow anything, e.g., either side of my front door and under the over-hang around my patio which is against my house. With the advent of soilless mixes containing water holding crystals the number of times I need to water is reduced.

In my mixed perennial border I grow the tall cosmos in the back of the border and calendula in the front of the border. For the most part, they reseed themselves.

My 10 favorite annuals are Geraniums, Lobelia 'Crystal Palace', Dragon-wing begonia, Impatiens, Blue Salvia 'Victoria', Cosmos, Nasturtium, Calendula, Scaevola & Torenia.

1. **Annual Geraniums** or botanically speaking Pelargoniums.

Annual geraniums are drought tolerant, no pest, always look good & come in a wide range of color, for hanging baskets, containers or bedding & can be grown in full sun to part shade. For bedding plants I look for well grown, basal branching plants with 4-6 branches. For hanging baskets I prefer the thick leaved ivy geraniums with compact flower heads. The geraniums are planted in a container & receive morning sun to about 11am. I plant Lobelia 'Crystal Palace' with them which I grow from seed myself. They bloom till frost kills them.



2. **Lobelia 'Crystal Palace'** is the lobelia that forms round mounds of purple blue flowers with coppery leaves. I have found over the years they last longer until frost, even surviving earwig damage, when I grow them myself. I also get more plants for my money.

3. **Dragon-Wing Begonia**---what a plant!

If you grow only one plant grow this one – this plant is worth whatever you pay for it. It will grow in sun to part shade. In sun it does best with a bit of shade from the hottest sun (10:00am-2:00pm). It is very forgiving so if you are away a few days it will survive even if no one waters it. Do not over water this plant – being a begonia it is subject to fungal disease & rot. I wait till the soil is dry then water. I stick my finger in soil to test.



Dragon-Wing begonia is a cross between angel wing & wax begonia inheriting the best of both parents. The leaves are a glossy rich green & the abundant flowers come in red or pink. One plant is 12-15" high and grows to 15-18" wide. Stunning in the shade. I plant it in a container at the cottage and it receives no water except rain and from one visit to the next. It dies with the frost. I pay between \$4-6/plant.



4. **Impatiens**—the old fashioned Bizzy Lizzy has come a long way!

There are so many different impatiens & the breeders have been very busy. We (the buyer) never see half of what is available. The range from 4", 10" to 12" tall. Minis, doubles and, of course, the New Guinea impatiens.

The color range is pink, white, red, mauve, lilac, bicolors and now even blue and yellow. They are all self-cleaning. A bit messy as the petals fall all over, but hey the trade-off is continuous color in the shade.

5. **Salvia farinacea 'Victoria'** – blue salvia or mealy-cup sage.

Which also comes in white, bi-colour white & blue, but I prefer the violet-blue as it is more striking. This annual is 14-30" high. It branches to form a thick clump with many flower spikes by the end of the summer. If grows well in sun or filtered light. It is great as a cut flower in a mixed bouquet of nasturtiums, cosmos & calendula in October.



6. **Cosmos**

A fast growing annual that needs full sun & not too rich soil. Seed directly or start early. Large colour range white, pink, mauve, orange, yellow and bi-colours. They range in height from 15"- 4' high and have ferny leaves. Attracts beneficial insects, butterflies and seed eating birds. They will continue to bloom whether you deadhead or not. Reseeds. Great cut flower. The tall varieties may need staking. I plant Cosmos in a mixed perennial border. You can also plant a row in the vegetable garden so you have lots for cut flowers.

7. **Scaevola**—Australian fan flower.

This Australian perennial is native to the arid regions of the South Pacific & Australia where it grows in near phosphorus free soil and has a hard time dealing with our fertilizers that are high in phosphorus. So for the fan flower chose a fertilizer high NK and low in P. It prefers a slightly acid soil so add peat moss.

This plant became popular in the 1990s and is propagated from cutting only (not seed) which makes it a bit more expensive plant but well worth it.



It does well in sun or partial shade & once it starts blooming goes till frost. Do not set out too early as it is very tender. Deadheading is not necessary. It comes in blue, mauve, pink, purple & white. I grow the blue fan flower and Dragon-wing begonia in a cast iron container facing east—very nice.



8. **Nasturtium**—*Tropaeolum majus*.

Common nasturtium is a fast growing annual with cream, red, or orange flowers. The round leaves are a bright green (and some are variegated) and as the plant matures the leaves can get quite large. The seeds are round and look like peas when young but as they get older they turn brown and the seed coat becomes thick and dry. Nasturtiums can be planted directly in the ground after the danger of frost has passed (usually Victoria weekend in Ottawa's zone 5b). When the soil is warm, chose a sunny or partly shady spot in your garden, poke a hole in the soil about 2.5 cm deep (fingers work best) and drop the large seed into the hole and cover with soil as they need darkness to germinate. Pat the soil firmly the soil with your hand and then water. The seed germinates in 7-10 days when the soil temperature is 15-18°C. Never over water or fertilize your nasturtiums or your plant will produce almost no flowers, just leaves. All parts of nasturtiums are edible & are great in salads adding beautiful color & a peppery taste. The seeds can be pickled and can replace caper in recipes.

9. **Calendula**—Pot marigold.

The Romans named this plant which is derived from the Latin word for calendar because this plant bloomed in every month of the year. For us that means summer to frost when seeded directly into the garden in the spring. You can also start them in early May in pots. The color range is orange, apricot, yellow and cream with single or double petals. They grow 12-18" tall and spread about the same. Plant in sun to partial shade and they will reseed themselves. Use them in containers, bedding, cut flower and you can eat it. Great in salads.



10. **Torenia**—wishbone flower

Torenia gets its name from the construction of the flower. The flower is designed for bees to land on the anther which then causes the plant to shake pollen on the bee which then goes to another plant—both get what they want. Torenia grows well in partial to deep shade. It is only about 6" high but spread because whenever a leaf node lands on the soil it puts roots down. The color range is blues, pinks and mauve. It attracts hummingbirds. Use in containers, edging beds, hanging basket. Look for young plants at the nursery, as old plants do not transplant well.