

Flowers for Cutting

Be your own florist and grow your own cut flowers.

The cut flower industry is enormous, with roses flown in from India, Israel and the Canary Islands, carnations from Italy, Chile and Ecuador, and orchids from as far away as Thailand. While our main supplier is the Netherlands, many Third World countries are in on the act, devoting large amounts of land and water to this export. All at a time when their agriculture isn't supplying enough food for their citizens. In 2009, Kenya voiced concern about food shortages while exporting nearly 20,000 tons of cut flowers, worth £52m to the U.K. A slick, sophisticated system makes sure flowers are cut, driven and flown from the other side of the world to arrive in our shops in pristine state 24 – 48 hours later.

Gardeners can help reduce this trade and its environmental impact by growing their own. Treat cut flowers as part of the garden's harvest and you need surprisingly little space to bring a wee bit of colour to the window sill. And it need cost no more than a few packets of seeds.

One big advantage is that the ground you set aside for cut flowers should keep looking good for months, despite your constant cutting. Everybody spends a lot of time dead-heading sweet peas, and I get lots of emails from readers, who delight in the chore. The point of this is to encourage the plants to keep flowering. They need to produce seed for the next generation, so, in the case of hardy annuals, the more you pick, the more they keep on flowering. It makes much more sense to cut some flowers at an early stage, to live-head, and enjoy the show indoors as well as in the garden.

Unlike a veg patch, this kind of flower bed should be kept low in nutrients. I find beautiful annuals, like calendulas, will happily seed and flourish in a path, so, only an occasional light dressing of compost will suffice. In any case, overfeeding would encourage lush, leafy growth at the expense of flowers. Once the plants are about 10cm tall, spread a weed-suppressing mulch close to, but not touching the stems. It will prevent moisture from evaporating. A low-nutrient mulch, like leafmould or woodchip, is best.

Your choice of site is important as the flowers will need plenty of sun to stop them becoming leggy. A sheltered spot for long-stemmed varieties will prevent dispiriting wind damage and it pays dividends to stake the growing plants with some fanned branches. The final point is to make sure all the flowers are within easy reach, so, if you have a wide bed, you'll probably need to have a path up the middle. Another completely different approach for growing is to make little pockets, scattered throughout the garden, say in front of shrubs or at the corner of a perennial border.

So what to plant? You can use bulbs, some shrubs and biennials, but hardy annuals are quickest and simplest. There are varieties to suit every taste and to provide flowers from early summer till the autumn. The most reliable way of getting early blooms is to sow some varieties now in a propagator, rather than direct sowing the previous autumn, as is often done further south. That technique rarely works here, with fewer hours of sunlight and lower temperatures.

One good candidate for early sowing is nigella: *Nigella hispanica* 'Love in a mist', in white or mid-blue is a wonderful light, 'airy' flower. Another early candidate is cornflower. I love the contrast between *Centaurea cyanus* 'Red Boy's' small pink blooms with the deep magenta of *Centaurea* 'Black Ball'. I direct sow the easily-handled seed in root trainers, 3 to a cell, and then put them in the propagator; 8cm/3" pots would also work. Sow sweet peas from as early as

January through to March at the latest. Sow singly in small pots and plant out when the soil warms up.

Most of these annuals are sown directly outside when the soil is fine and warm: if you jump the gun and start while the ground is cold, you'll end up with poor germination because the seed will simply sit and rot. Scabious is a good mid season annual: *Scabiosa atropurpurea* has white or crimson pompon flowers that look great when mixed together. These hardy annuals just keep going. From late summer, sunflowers come into their own, helianthus bursts into flower, and *Helianthus annuus* 'Deep Red', with its wonderful dark, velvety flowers, takes some beating.

You'll need some greenery as well, and there's no doubt that tall and superbly delicate asparagus ferns are ideal: they're a small consolation once you've finished cutting the asparagus spears, I suppose. Ornamental grasses, like *Hordeum jubatum*, Squirrel tail grass, which is barley-like, or *Panicum miliaceum* 'Violaceum' will fit the bill nicely. Alternatively, simply buy a mixed pack of annual grasses and take pot luck

The more you cut, the more you get!