

Hardy annuals

Sun loving hardy annuals add a splash of colour, as if by magic, and fill many a gap in the border.

In Scotland, hardy annuals grow easily and well; they're nae hassle plants largely because they're opportunists that occur naturally in poor and disturbed soil and are adapted to make the best of it. Wild candytuft, *Iberis amara*, sometimes grows in bare ground next to a rabbit warren – a pretty inhospitable spot for most plants. Others, like Larkspur, *Consolida ambigua*, and Sweet scabious, *Scabiosa atropurpurea*, thrive in shallow or sandy soils that large perennial plants can't handle. This means they must quickly develop extensive root systems to find scarce water and nutrients, so often don't like disturbance and transplanting.

Not only are they hardy enough to survive difficult terrains, but they're also hardy in the botanical sense in that they'll cope with frosts. On the other hand, the half-hardy brigade simply can't be sown outside, but need cosseting in a greenhouse till the frosts are securely past. So check on a seed packet that flowers you'd like are described as 'hardy annuals'.

When it comes to sowing, be patient. We're always champing to get going in the garden, but we really must wait - maybe even till May – to let the soil warm up before direct sowing. Otherwise, the seed will simply rot in cold, wet soil, and, have no fear, later sowings will still produce an abundance of flowers.

I shamelessly capitalise on the fact that these hardy annuals survive pretty poor soil, but you must make sure it's fine and unclaggy. You do this by raking over carefully, breaking up any clods or lumps. And every stone removed is a bonus: my wife gives stones no quarter, with each victim consigned to an ever-present bucket.

Weeds are as bad as stones, and, at the early stages, it's none too easy to distinguish between them and your sowings. The answer is to sow in straight lines, blocks, diamonds or even circles. I like to keep myself right by marking out the lines with a thin layer of horticultural sand: fill a bottle with dry sand and mark out the pattern you want. Anything outside the lines is a weed, so is for the chop.

Once you've got your pattern, use your finger to make a drill 1-2cm deep, remove the rose from the watering can, water well before sowing. Whenever sowing, always water the drill, then sow, to prevent the seed from being spread all over the place. The dry soil you sprinkle on top also acts like a mulch, preventing the water from evaporating; this, in turn, encourages plant roots downwards to the water, rather than towards the surface.

What happens next depends on the plants you're sowing. With larger seeds, like *Nigella* or *Calendula*, place individual seeds every 2cm along a line, but dust-like poppy seeds are different. Use a small pinch at a time, move your hand quickly along the line, sprinkling very thinly. Don't hesitate and certainly don't backtrack! Then cover the seed with a thin layer of fine, dry soil. With large seed, like sweet peas, push them into the soil to a depth of your first finger joint. A final thrifty thought: keep any leftover seed for next year – it should be perfectly viable.

You'll find that most seed germinates within a fortnight, and once the second pair of leaves have formed, start thinning. Carefully remove seedlings, leaving one every 10cm or so. I know it seems terrible to take out and compost most of them, but the survivors will become much sturdier. Otherwise, when they're competing hard for light and nutrients, they'll become

etiolated and leggy and will rush to produce seed, rather than flowering for a good few weeks. Water generously after thinning, and keep the plot well watered till the plants are about 10cm tall: by then, their root systems should be able to search for water. As with all watering, a good soak once or twice a week is much better than a tiny damping every night.

Once the seedlings start touching each other, start the second and final thinning. The spacing will depend on the plant, so check that out from the seed packet. After leaving the healthiest specimens, you may be able to transplant some species, like Cornflowers, *Centaurea cyanus*. This wonderfully hardy specimen usually comes with brilliant blue flowers, but you can also get pink varieties and do look out for that amazingly black flowered 'Black Ball'. If you are transplanting, thoroughly soak the ground and carefully dig out as much of the plant's root ball as possible to avoid damaging the roots.

Sadly, some of my favourites like Love-in-a-mist, *Nigella hispanica* and *Nigella damascena*, just don't take kindly to transplanting. This delicate plant comes in whites and pinks as well as the more usual shades of blue. There's the added bonus of splendid seed heads: *N. damascena* produces large inflated pods clasped by wiry claws, while *N. hispanica* offers us superb crimson crowns.

Whatever your choice of flowers, Poppies, Night-scented stock, or Pot marigold, use them to fill gaps and hide holes caused by the ravages of a hard winter.