



Suggested Annual Flowers for Illinois

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Home gardeners find the use of annual flowers colorful additions to any flower bed and landscape. This versatility makes them useful in most gardens since they are available in a wide range of colors and sizes. By taking advantage of all the qualities annuals have to offer, a home gardener can present an attractive landscape that will bloom from spring to fall. The term 'annual' when applied to garden flowers refers to plants that complete their life cycle in one growing season. During this time, they grow, flower, produce seed and die. Many tender perennials, which are not winter hardy in Illinois and flower quickly from seed, are treated as annuals. Examples of these plants are coleus, impatiens, vinca, geranium, and snapdragon.

Types of Annuals

Annuals are often classified as **hardy**, **half-hardy**, or **tender**. These classifications refer to the temperature range that annuals need in order to germinate and grow successfully. A plant's hardiness does not refer to its overall strength or vigor, but to its specific ability to withstand cold. This should not be confused with winter hardiness of woody trees and shrubs.

Hardy annuals can stand the most cold of all and can tolerate light frosts without being killed or badly damaged. Some hardy annuals include pansy, snapdragon, sweet alyssum, calendula, and flowering cabbage/kale. Half-hardy annuals can tolerate long periods of cold, wet, damp weather but can be damaged or killed by frost. Some half-hardy annuals are cosmos, lobelia, marigold, and petunia. Tender annuals need warm soils to germinate and grow properly and warm air temperatures to produce the best flower display. Tender annuals will not tolerate frosts and can be damaged by cool air temperatures. Some tender annuals are coleus, geranium, portulaca, verbena, zinnia, and impatiens.

The following annuals are recommended for Illinois. Under each flower, you will find information a description of the flowers, the average height of plant, its preferred exposure, tolerance to cold (hardy = tolerates frost, tender = must be planted out after danger of frost), suggested method of planting (direct seeded and/or transplant), any items of note, and recommended cultivars. The designation AAS in the cultivar description refers to All America Selections winner.

Suggested Annuals for Sun

Ageratum (*Ageratum houstonianum*)

Flowers: fuzzy flowers, each flower over 1/2 inch in diameter; in clusters; shades of blue, lavender blue, lilac, white, pink

Height: 6 to 12 inches

Exposure: sun or part shade

Tender

Transplant

Notes: excellent edging plant

Recommended cultivars: 'Blue Danube', 'Blue Horizon', 'Hawaii' series

Alyssum, Sweet (*Lobularia maritima*)

Flowers: many small florets in a rounded head; flowers literally cover the branched, low-spreading plants; pure white is the most popular but deep lavender, pink, and mixtures are available.

Height: 4 to 10 inches

Exposure: sun

Hardy

Transplant

Notes: excellent as edging or trailing over wall or container; fragrant

Recommended cultivars: 'Carpet of Snow', 'Easter Bonnet', 'Rosie O'Day', 'Snow Crystals'

Cockscomb (*Celosia argentea var. cristata*)

Flowers: striking, enlarged, flattened, rounded or crested flower heads 2 to 10 inches wide; yellow, gold, orange, red, purple-red, pink, salmon

Height: 8 inches to 3 feet

Exposure: sun

Tender

Direct seed or transplant

Notes: bright colors; can be used as everlasting

Recommended cultivars: 'Jewel Box', 'Prestige Scarlet' (AAS), Bombay series

Feather or Plume Celosia (*Celosia argentea* var. *plumosa*)

Flowers: graceful, feathery plume spikes; showy; yellow, gold, orange, red, pink, salmon

Height: 10 inches to 5 feet

Exposure: sun

Tender

Direct seed or transplant

Notes: bright colors all summer; good for vertical accent; heat and drought tolerant

Recommended cultivars: 'Apricot Brandy' (AAS), Castle series, Century series, 'New Look' (AAS)

Coleus (*Solenostemon scutellarioides*)

Flowers: usually white to lavender, borne on terminal spikes; not overly showy but can be attractive on some cultivars

Leaves: 1 to 6 inches long and in a wide variety of shapes; brilliantly colored, either all one color or variously patterned and variegated in shades of red, maroon, green, yellow, pink, or mauve.

Height: 10 inches to almost 3 feet

Exposure: sun (cultivars adapted to)

Tender

Transplant

Notes: grown for foliage that is offered in dozens of color combinations; pinch plants for bushiness

Recommended cultivars: numerous

Cosmos (*Cosmos bipinnatus*)

Flowers: single or semi-double, daisy-like, 3 to 4 inches in diameter; wide serrated petals around prominent yellow center; shades of pink, rose, red, plus white and several variegated patterns and bicolors; excellent for cutting.

Leaves: delicate and feathery; fresh light green color

Height: 2 to 5 feet

Exposure: sun or part shade

Tender

Direct seed

Notes: great for cut flowers; excellent for meadow look

Recommended cultivars: 'Candy Stripe', 'Picotee', 'Sensation', 'Seashells', Sonata series

Sunny Cosmos, Yellow Cosmos (*Cosmos sulphureus*)

Flowers: single or semi-double, up to 3 inches in diameter; serrated petals; center of flowers tufted and very prominent; shades of yellow, orange, and red;

Leaves: pinnate and deeply cut, not as fine-textured as Cosmos and deeper green in color

Height: 2 to 3 feet

Exposure: sun or part shade

Tender

Direct seed

Notes: brighter colors than regular cosmos

Recommended cultivars: 'Bright Lights', Sunny series, 'Sunset'

Dusty Miller (*Senecio cineraria*)

Foliage: stiff, silvery, wooly; varies from almost entire to deeply lobed

Height: 6 to 10 inches

Exposure: sun to part shade

Hardy

Transplant

Notes: excellent edging or accent plant, flowers are small, bright yellow daisy-like clusters, not overly showy

Recommended cultivars: 'Cirrus', 'New Look', 'Silver Dust'

Geranium (*Pelargonium x hortorum*)

Flowers: produced in an umbel 4 to 5 inches in diameter; florets usually single but some semi-doubles available; white and shades of pink, rose, red, salmon, crimson, some with contrasting 'eye'.

Leaves: rounded, 3 to 5 inches across; scalloped or bluntly toothed; often with a 'zone' or 'horseshoe' mark; leaves and stems hairy with pungent odor.

Height: 10 inches to 2 feet

Exposure: sun

Half hardy

Transplant

Notes: some are seed-grown, others cutting-grown

Recommended cultivars: 'Black Magic Rose' (AAS) 'Ringo', 'Orange Appeal', 'Orbit', 'Pinto'

Globe Amaranth (*Gomphrena globosa*)

Flowers: 3/4 to 1 inch, rounded, clover-like with papery feel; purple-red, white, pink, orange-red

Height: 10 to 24 inches

Exposure: sun

Hardy

Direct seed or transplant

Notes: excellent everlasting

Recommended cultivars: Gnome series, Buddy series, 'Strawberry Fields'

Heliotrope (*Heliotropium arborescens*)

Flowers: tiny, 1/4 inch florets in clusters up to almost 8 inches in diameter; blue, purple-violet, or white; fragrance similar to vanilla; good contrast to wrinkled, hairy leaves

Height: 1 to 2 feet

Exposure: sun

Half-hardy

Transplant

Notes: old-fashioned plant with wonderful fragrance

Recommended cultivars: 'Blue Wonder', 'Fragrant Delight', 'Marine', 'Midnight'

Spider Flower, Cleome (*Cleome hasslerana*)

Flowers: large rounded heads 6 to 7 inches in diameter; each flower has long spidery stamens; white, pink, light rose, rosy lavender, cerise, and mixtures; followed by long-stalked seed capsules;

Height: 2 to 5 feet

Exposure: sun

Tender

Direct seed

Notes: good for background; reseeds easily and can become a problem

Recommended cultivars: Queen series, 'Helen Campbell', 'Sparkler Blush' (AAS)

Marigold, Dwarf French (*Tagetes patula*)

Flowers: mostly double flowers, 1 to 2 inches in diameter but some single types; many shades of yellow, gold, orange, mahogany-red or combinations of these colors.

Height: 6 to 18 inches

Exposure: sun

Half hardy

Direct seed or transplant

Notes: tough edging plant

Recommended cultivars: 'Bonanza Bolero', Janie series, 'Mr. Majestic', Safari series, Sophia series

Marigold, American (*Tagetes erecta*)

Flowers: globe-shaped, 3 to 5 inches in diameter; shades of yellow, gold, and orange to white; flowers and leaves have pungent odor.

Height 18 to 36 inches

Exposure: sun

Half hardy

Direct seed or Transplant

Notes: easy to grow and dependable; bright flower colors

Recommended cultivars: Discovery series, Inca series, Lady series, Perfection series

Pansy (*Viola x wittrockiana*)

Flowers: 2 to 3 inches across, with 5 overlapping petals that look like huge violets; purple, white, blue, dark red, orange, rose, and yellow, often combined in various striped or blotched patterns.

Height: 6 to 8 inches

Exposure: sun or part shade

Hardy

Transplant

Notes: tend to do best with cooler temperatures

Recommended cultivars: Accord series, Joker series, 'Ultima Morpho' (AAS)

Petunia (*Petunia x hybrida*)

Flowers: 2 to 5 inches in diameter; tubular or trumpet-shaped with outer portion widely flaring; many colors (red, crimson, blue, purple, pink, rose, coral, salmon, cream-yellow, white and some two-color combinations); somewhat fragrant; numerous types including milliflora (1-inch flower), multiflora (2 to 3-inch flowers, quite weather tolerant), grandifloras (3 to 5-inch flowers); single or double flower forms

Height: 6 to 14 inches

Exposure: sun or part shade

Half hardy

Transplant

Notes: one of the most popular annuals; versatile in that it can be used for edging, mass plantings, containers;

Recommended cultivars

Grandiflora: Cloud, Daddy, Dreams, Falcon, Magic series

Multiflora: Joy, Polo, Primetime series

Milliflora: 'Frosty Pink Morn'

Hedgiflora: 'Tidal Wave Silver' (AAS)

Spreading: 'Lavender Wave' (AAS), 'Purple Wave' (AAS), 'Rose Wave'

Portulaca, Rose Moss (*Portulaca grandiflora*)

Flowers: 1 to 2 inches in diameter, rose-like; single, semi-double, or double shades of rose, salmon, pink, scarlet, orchid, yellow, orange, white, and some striped; newer cultivars have large, fully double flowers that stay open longer, especially on cloudy days.

Leaves: narrow, fleshy, succulent, similar to the pernicious garden weed, purslane.

Exposure: sun

Tender

Transplant

Notes: thrives in hot, dry conditions

Recommended cultivars: Margarita series, Sunnyside series, Sundial series

Blue Salvia, Mealycup Sage (*Salvia farinacea*)

Flowers: borne on slender spikes; individual flowers small, lipped; colors range from white through deep blue-lavender.

Height: 2 to 3 feet

Exposure: sun to part shade

Half hardy

Transplant

Notes: one of the most dependable annuals for Illinois

Recommended cultivars: 'Cirrus', 'Rhea', 'Strata' (AAS), 'Victoria'

Scarlet Sage, Red Salvia, Salvia (*Salvia splendens*)

Flowers: colorful spikes, usually vivid scarlet red but other cultivars available in purple, white, salmon; each flower 3/4 to almost 2 inches in length; entire spike up to 8 inches.

Height: 10 to 36 inches

Exposure: sun

Tender

Notes: pastel cultivars best in part shade

Recommended cultivars: Salsa series, Sizzler series

Snapdragon (*Antirrhinum majus*)

Flowers: tubular 'dragon-mouth' florets most common but open butterfly types available; each floret 1 to 2 inches long, densely ranked on upright spikes; bright shades of red, pink, yellow, orange, bronze, light lavender and white

Exposure: sun or part shade

Hardy

Notes: shorter cultivars excellent for edging; taller cultivars excellent for cutting

Recommended cultivars

Dwarf bedding: 'Bells', 'Chimes', 'Floral Carpet'

Medium height: 'Liberty', 'Princess White With Purple Eye' (AAS), 'Sonnet'

Tall: 'Madame Butterfly' (AAS)

Tobacco, Flowering (*Nicotiana alata*)

Flowers: 1 to 2 inches in diameter, 5-lobed and tubular; somewhat fragrant; colors range from white, pink, rose, green.

Height: 10 to 18 inches

Exposure: sun

Tender

Notes: dozens of flowers per plant for garden impact

Recommended cultivars: Avalon series, Domino series, Hummingbird series, Nicki series

Verbena (*Verbena hybrids*)

Flowers: borne in flat to convex clusters 2 to 4 inches across; each floret is heart-shaped; usually fragrant; white, yellow, pink, red, blue, lavender

Height: 6 to 15 inches

Exposure: sun to part shade

Tender

Notes: cultivars vary from upright to trailing habit

Recommended cultivars: Babylon series, 'Imagination', 'Peaches and Cream'

Vinca (*Catharanthus roseus*)

Flowers: 1 to 2 inches in diameter, single with 5 petals; white, light pink, rose, purple

Height: 6 to 24 inches

Exposure: sun or part shade

Tender

Transplant

Notes: excellent heat and drought tolerance

Recommended cultivars: Cooler series, Heat Wave series, Tropicana series

Zinnia (*Zinnia elegans*)

Flowers: size ranges from 1 inch to 7 inches in diameter; wide range of colors from white, cream, yellow, orange, red, pink, rose, violet, white, and even green; also multicolored and striped cultivars; usually fully double; petals usually flat but sometimes curled, quilled, or twisted.

Height: 6 inches to 3 feet

Exposure: sun

Tender

Easy to grow from seed; sometimes transplants available

Notes: very dependable for flowering; taller types excellent for cutting; can be very susceptible to powdery mildew – provide good spacing and air circulation, avoid excessive watering of foliage

Recommended cultivars: Ruffles, Peter Pan series (AAS), Dasher series, 'Envy'

Annuals for Shade

Wax, Fibrous-rooted Begonia (*Begonia x semperflorens-cultorum*)

Flowers: usually single, 3/4 to 2 inches in diameter; borne in axillary clusters; white to shades of pink and scarlet-red, salmon, and several bicolors

Height: 8 to 15 inches

Exposure: shade

Tender

Transplant

Notes

Recommended cultivars: Cocktail series, Party series, Ambassador series, Cameo series, Doublet

Impatiens (*Impatiens wallerana*)

Flowers: 1 to 2 inches wide, single or double with spur on back; many colors including white, pink, rose, red, orange, and salmon; some with star pattern.

Height: 6 to 18 inches

Exposure: shade

Tender

Transplant

Notes: one of best annuals for shade; provides color all summer;

Recommended cultivars: Super Elfin series, Mosaic series, Stardust series, Firefly (miniature flowers on normal size plants), 'Victorian Rose'

Lobelia (*Lobelia erinus*)

Flowers: 1/2 to 3/4 inches wide; shades of blue are the most popular but white and pinkish-violet are available; some have contrasting white 'eye'.

Habit; densely branched with thin, thread-like stems; available as trailing or upright cultivars.

Exposure: shade

Hardy

Transplant

Notes: tends to be fragile in Illinois climate; trailing cultivars excellent for container

Recommended cultivars: Palace series, Mrs. Clibran Improved, 'Periwinkle Blue', 'Tioga', 'Sapphire', Regatta series, Fountain series

Recommended Annuals for Specific Locations

Heavy shade: impatiens, begonia, coleus, browallia, fuchsia, torenia.

Light shade: lobelia, nicotiana, salvia, pansy, ageratum, dahlia, dianthus, dusty miller, ornamental pepper, sweet alyssum, impatiens, begonia.

Dry and drought conditions: amaranthus, African daisy, vinca, gazania, kochia, sweet alyssum, portulaca, blue salvia, creeping zinnia, dusty miller, celosia, petunia, cleome, strawflower, zinnia, geranium.

Moist areas: torenia, pansy, ageratum, browallia, calendula, flowering cabbage and kale, impatiens, lobelia, nicotiana, ornamental pepper, salvia, stock, sweet alyssum.

Hot spots: amaranth, ornamental pepper, vinca, celosia, kochia, petunia, portulaca, salvia, creeping zinnia, dusty miller, triploid marigolds, verbena, zinnia, gazania, coleus, flowering tobacco, dahlberg daisy.

Cool climates: stock, primrose, pansy, browallia, calendula, lobelia, snapdragon.

Selecting Plant Varieties

The number of flower varieties available to the home gardener is astounding. Plant breeding and selection continues to result in many new varieties of old-time favorites. Here are some things to consider when selecting varieties.

Hybrids

Most of the newer flower varieties are F₁ hybrids and are identified as such on seed packets and in catalogs. F₁ hybrids are produced from specific crosses between two known parents. These new hybrids are usually more vigorous and uniform in color, size, and habit of growth than the standard or open-pollinated varieties. The number and quality of the flowers is also usually increased. Hybrid vigor is very evident in the F₁ hybrids and this justifies the increased cost of the seed. Some gardeners try to save seed from their annuals. This practice is not recommended unless the seed is taken from plants that are non-hybrid. Saving seed from F₁ hybrids often results in inferior plants that do not resemble the parents in size, color, habit, or vigor.

All-America Selections

Each year, many new annuals are offered to the gardening public. Those that have been outstanding in trials throughout the United States, Canada, and Mexico are designated as All-America Selections (AAS). Generally, these varieties are unique in color, plant habit, or flower production and should be considered when making seed or plant selections. These varieties have the All-America Selections logo on seed packets and transplant labels.

Trial Gardens

In addition to All-America Selections trial and display gardens, there are numerous other places to make observations about varieties that are unique and display good garden performance. Check out display gardens at local arboreta, botanic gardens, and garden centers and make up your own mind as to what looks good and what doesn't. In Illinois, one of the AAS trial gardens is the Hartley Selections Garden, which is located on the University of Illinois campus in Urbana.

Use Fresh Seed

In order to get a good start toward raising vigorous plants, viable seed packaged for the current year is recommended. Although some seed remains viable for many years, seed saved from previous years will lose vigor especially with improper storage. Seed that is not properly stored tends to germinate slowly and erratically, resulting in poor seedling growth. If seed must be stored, keep it cool and dry. These conditions can be achieved by placing the seed packets into a jar along with some powdered milk (wrapped into tissue) to absorb excess moisture, sealed, and placed in the refrigerator.

Soil Preparation

Not enough emphasis can be placed on properly preparing the soil prior to planting annuals. Most soils tend to be heavy clay that are poorly drained and aerated. One of the best ways to improve them is with the addition of organic matter. For a new bed, spread 4 to 6 inches of material (mushroom compost, sphagnum peat moss, manure, composted leaves) over the surface and till into the top 6 to 8 inches of soil. In addition, apply 1.5 to 2 pounds of a general-purpose fertilizer (i.e. 5-10-5 or 10-10-10) per 100 square feet prior to planting and work it into the soil. For more information about soils, refer to the first chapter of this section.

Planting

Sowing Seed Outdoors

Annuals can be direct-seeded outdoors. Germination can be a problem though, because the soil surface cakes and dries out preventing proper germination. To avoid this, sow the seed in a vermiculite-filled row. After the planting bed has been prepared, make a furrow about 1 inch deep and 1 inch wide. Fill the furrow with fine vermiculite and water lightly. Make another shallow furrow in the vermiculite and sow the seed. Cover the seed lightly with vermiculite, mist lightly, and cover the area with newspapers to prevent excess drying. Remove the paper as soon as the seedlings appear. Thin or transplant seedlings to stand at recommended spacing. In your first thinning, remove enough seedlings so that you have approximately twice as many plants left as you want to grow to full maturity. Make the second thinning when the plants are 3 to 4 inches tall. If delayed too long, the second thinning will disturb the root systems of the remaining plants. If you leave too many plants, your flower bed will produce plants that have poor quality foliage and flowers. Soil temperature is also important in direct sowing. For most annuals, temperatures of at least 60 degrees F. result in good germination.

Setting Out Transplants

Whether you grow your own transplants or buy them, most annuals should not be set out until after the last expected frost in the spring. As mentioned earlier the last expected frost dates are May 1 for southern Illinois, May 15 for central Illinois, and May 20 to 30 for northern Illinois. An exception to this rule is that frost-tolerant annuals may be set out several weeks before the last expected frost. These dates are averages and not firm. A gardener needs to be aware of current local conditions at the time of planting.

Before transplanting, be sure the soil in each cell or pot is moist. Remove the plants from the cell packs by pressing out the bottom and popping them out. Note the root growth. If there is a tight mass of roots, lightly rough up the root ball with your fingers to loosen it. This encourages the roots to grow out into the planting bed and not stay confined to just the area of the cell or pot. When planting plants grown in peat pots, remove the part of the pot above the soil surface. If left on, it can trap excess water and the lip of the pot may act as a wick and dry out the roots around the interior of the pot. The bottom of fiber or peat pots can be removed to improve water drainage and rooting. When setting out plants grown in compressed peat pellets (i.e. Jiffy-7), the netting surrounding the peat should be removed to allow the roots to grow into the planting bed.

Few home gardeners leave enough space between plants. Plan to leave 10 to 12 inches between most low-growing annuals. Leave 18 to 24 inches between tall annuals. If you leave space in which your plants can grow, you'll get much better results. A good rule of thumb is to leave a space between plants that is approximately one-half of their anticipated height.

Set plants only slightly deeper than they were set in the growing container. Setting plants too deep often causes poor root growth and stunted, poorly developed plants. Firm the soil around the plant and water thoroughly. A starter fertilizer should be used at time of transplanting. Starter fertilizers have a high phosphorus content (i.e. 10-52-17 or similar analysis). Generally, 1 tablespoon of fertilizer is added to a gallon of water and 1 cup of the solution is used around each plant. However, gardeners should follow the directions on the fertilizer label.