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YOUR MIDWEST GARDEN

AN OWNER'S MANUAL

JAN RIGGENBACH

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS • LINCOLN AND LONDON

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Set in Arno and Neutraface
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Designed by Nathan Putens.

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PREFACE

To survive in the Midwest, a plant has to be tough. Tough enough to survive winter's bitter cold, often without the moderating effect of a snow blanket. Tough enough to withstand soaring temperatures in summer as well as the high humidity that encourages foliage diseases. Tough enough to stand up to high winds, severe droughts, even periodic floods.

So, what does it take to make a successful garden in the Midwest, where the prairie soils are rich and the weather is wicked? I've learned by trial and error, first as a curious child in Missouri, then by stuffing plants onto a city yard in Nebraska, and later by planting to my heart's content on an acreage in Iowa.

As a garden writer, I've had a chance to visit hundreds of gardens and research plots throughout the Midwest and enjoy countless hours of "garden talk" with Midwest gardeners.

Experience has gradually taught me which plants can take this climate in their stride and which are better left to other regions. I've learned how to control common Midwest pests and diseases without resorting to chemicals that harm other living things. I continue to search for new tricks to help my plants better cope with the challenges they face.

Since 1975 I've shared my garden successes and failures with readers of my syndicated newspaper column, "Midwest Gardening." This book offers a new look at the best of the information and ideas in those columns, revised and updated, along with charts and an index for easy reference.

Happy gardening!

Author's note: This book is written especially for gardeners in the twelve Midwest states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

YOUR MIDWEST GARDEN

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CHAPTER 1

ANNUALS

SEASONAL SHOWOFFS

Sweltering, sweaty summer days can make the Midwest feel like the Caribbean. So a lot of perennials take a break — from blooming. What’s left to make the midsummer garden colorful and exciting? Annuals! They’re what give the best Midwest gardens the lush look of the tropics in high summer.

After the first fall frost turns many plants to mush, annuals can fill that void, too, with cold-tolerant varieties sprucing up the landscape until Thanksgiving or even beyond.

With only a single season to live their whole lives, annuals are programmed to bloom their hearts out in all kinds of weather, providing weeks of continuous color.

Dozens of new introductions every year join hundreds of tried-and-true favorites, providing today’s gardeners a huge palette of annuals. By selecting some of the newcomers and others from the host of old-fashioned standbys, it’s easier than ever to stage your own exciting annual event.

Annuals That Plant Themselves

“Is that plant a perennial or an annual?”

That’s one of the most common questions I hear.

If I say the plant is an annual, I often hear a murmured, “Oh, that’s too bad,” as the eyes of some in the audience glaze over. These are the

people who routinely dismiss annuals because of the belief that all annuals require extra time and expense to replant every year.

But that's not true. It's been decades since I've planted many of my favorite annuals in my own garden. These self-seeding annuals return year after year without any effort on my part. Better yet, I never have to dig and divide them, a routine task required to successfully grow most perennials.

All that's necessary for success with self-seeding annuals is to allow some seeds to fall to the ground at the end of the season.

What plants behave this way? One of my favorites is melampodium. These bushy plants, which are covered all season with yellow daisy-like flowers, seem to laugh at heat and drought. And they never require dead-heading, the removal of spent blossoms to encourage new ones.

Another favorite is globe amaranth, also known as gomphrena. I like its cute ball-shaped flowers of lavender, pink, purple, red, or white.

The flower spikes of scarlet sage attract hummingbirds and butterflies all summer. From late summer through fall, volunteer plants of the closely related mealycup sage tint the garden purple.

A low border of volunteer ageratums rings a few shrubs. Towering castor beans and angel's trumpets show off in the back of a border. The daisy-like blossoms of cosmos nod on graceful stems in my cut-flower garden. All of these beauties reappear year after year. What could be easier than that?

SELF-SEEDING ANNUALS AND BIENNIALS

Angel's trumpet (*Datura metel*)
Bachelor buttons (*Centaurea cyanus*)
Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*)
Castor bean (*Ricinus communis*)
Cosmos (*C. bipinnatus* and *C. sulphureus*)
Dahlberg daisy (*Thymophylla tenuiloba*)
Floss flower (*Ageratum houstonianum*)
Four o'clock (*Mirabilis jalapa*)
Globe amaranth (*Gomphrena globosa*)
Immortelle (*Xeranthemum annuum*)

Kiss-me-over-the-garden-gate (*Persicaria orientalis*, syn. *Polygonum orientale*)
Larkspur (*Consolida ajacis*)
Love-in-a-mist (*Nigella damascena*)
Mealy-cup sage (*Salvia farinacea*)
Melampodium (*M. divaricatum*, syn. *M. paludosum*)
Moss rose (*Portulaca grandiflora*)
Peruvian zinnia (*Z. peruviana*)
Poppy (*Papaver nudicaule*, *P. rhoeas*, and *P. somniferum*)
Pot marigold (*Calendula officinalis*)
Scarlet sage (*Salvia coccinea*)
Spider flower (*Cleome hassleriana*)
Standing cypress (*Ipomopsis rubra*)
Sweet alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*)
Woodland tobacco (*Nicotiana glauca*)

Towering Annuals

With the proliferation of bedding plants, many people started to think of annuals as neat but boring little mounds of color. No wonder: tall annuals shoot up so fast they would be a nightmare for a commercial grower to produce in little packs or small pots.

But now, as many gardeners rediscover the joy of growing plants from seed, a kaleidoscope of interesting annuals is showing up in gardens again.

If you have a lot of space to fill, tall annuals are the answer. While perennials take several years to mature, these annuals shoot up to great

BEST BET

If you want to get self-seeding annuals established in your garden, you don't have to wait until spring. In late summer or autumn, just scatter the seeds on the ground where you want the plants to grow. You don't even have to cover the seeds with soil.

heights in just a few weeks. Quick to bloom, most continue flowering until frost.

Here are a few fast-growing annuals that will show off in your Mid-west garden:

Castor bean looks like a tropical tree by the end of summer with its huge, palm-shaped leaves towering above other garden plants. Once called “the palm of Christ,” castor beans were popular in Victorian gardens.

Choose varieties with purple or red leaves, pink or red flowers, and heights ranging from 3 to 10 feet. Plant them in a sunny spot but, because castor bean seeds are poisonous, avoid planting them where small children play.

Mexican sunflower grows quickly into a dense, shrubby plant 5 or 6 feet tall. The fiery orange or yellow daisy-like flowers that cover the plant from top to bottom are great for cutting, and they attract butterflies, too.

Don’t coddle Mexican sunflower; these natives of Mexico like their sun hot and their soil dry.

Hollyhock mallow (*Malva*), a cottage garden favorite, was scorned in Victorian times as too invasive. In my garden, volunteer seedlings are a welcome reminder of the striped pink or purple flowers that will soon bloom.

Although classed as a perennial, hollyhock mallow has always behaved as a self-seeding annual in my garden. Flowering begins in late spring while the plants are only 1 or 2 feet tall. By summer’s end, the flower-covered stalks stand an impressive 3 to 5 feet tall. Thriving in sun or partial shade, they are less prone to disease than regular hollyhocks.

Annuals for Summer’s Heat

Sooner or later, my perennial garden suffers a summer slump. Somewhere between the riotous blooms of midsummer and the beginning of the fall show of asters and mums, I notice that the prevailing color of perennials is green.

Thank goodness for annual flowers, now full-grown and blooming nonstop. Scattered throughout the perennial beds, annuals get their chance for glory in August.

Many heat-tolerant annuals are surprisingly easy to grow. Cosmos, for example, thrives in poor soil. Silky flowers in crimson, gold, orange, pink, rose, white, or yellow adorn the lacy foliage from midsummer until frost atop plants 2 to 4 feet tall, depending on variety.

Cleome is another great performer that thrives despite heat and drought. Also known as spider flower, cleome always draws plenty of oohs and ahs. The tall, dramatic plants produce masses of large, airy flowers in blends of pink, purple, rose, or white.

Moss rose is a short, heat-loving annual perfect for edging summer flowerbeds. Its fleshy, needle-like leaves help the plants survive dry spells. You can choose varieties with single or double flowers, in any color but true blue. Sundial hybrids offer a wide range of colors, strong performance, and flowers that stay open longer than most other varieties.

A close relative of the persistent weed called purslane, moss rose grows as vigorously as the weed. Go ahead and plant moss rose in poor soil, with minimal water and no fertilizer. That's when it's at its best.

Dahlberg daisy, with its tiny yellow daisies covering 6-inch mounds of fragrant, feathery foliage, is another edging plant that stands up beautifully to summer's heat. From seeds planted many years ago, they persist in my garden, sowing themselves here and there along the garden paths.

Dahlberg daisies look especially nice growing along the brick walk in front of my Zagreb coreopsis, where the pint-sized annuals echo the color, texture, and form of that hardy perennial.

Angelonias, sometimes called summer snapdragons, are adaptable plants that keep right on blooming not only through hot weather but well into autumn, too. With delicate-looking flower spikes filled with two-lipped blossoms that resemble snapdragons, angelonias are available both as upright plants 18 to 30 inches tall and as low, trailing plants that are perfect in baskets. Most named varieties are sold as plants, but, if you prefer, you can grow the Serena series from seed.

Color choices include lavender, orchid, pink, purple, violet, and white, plus some with two-toned flowers. In bouquets, they make beautiful and long-lasting cut flowers.

One reason I like angelonias is because the deer don't.

HOT-WEATHER FAVORITES

Cosmos (*Cosmos* species)
Dahlberg daisy (*Thymophylla tenuiloba*)
Euphorbia (*E.* hybrids)
Gazania (*G. rigens*)
Lisianthus (*Eustoma grandiflorum*)
Marigold (*Tagetes* species and hybrids)
Melampodium (*M. divaricatum*, syn. *M. paludosum*)
Moss rose (*Portulaca grandiflora*)
Ornamental pepper (*Capsicum annuum*)
Spider flower (*Cleome hassleriana*)
Summer snapdragon (*Angelonia angustifolia* and hybrids)
Vinca (*Catharanthus roseus*)
Zinnia (all *Zinnia* species and hybrids)

PRETTY PENTAS

I first got to know pentas one particularly brutal summer. Some of my annuals in containers had “cooked” in the blazing sun by August, so I went to a local garden center in search of replacements.

Pentas, also known as Egyptian star-flowers, caught my eye. They were the only plants in the place that still looked springtime fresh, with clusters of star-shaped flowers and handsome dark-green foliage.

The pentas I took home that day staged a continuous show that lasted until frost. Butterflies and hummingbirds, which paid constant visits to the flowers, doubled my admiration for these durable plants.

In recent years plant breeders have been developing pentas that are even more desirable. Compact, early-blooming varieties grow about 12 to 15 inches tall. You can choose pentas in a variety of colors, including lavender, magenta, mauve, pink, red, rose, and white.

Pentas are a perfect choice if your containers tend to get too thirsty before you can get back with more water; they actually prefer to dry out a little between waterings.

Rushing to set pentas out in spring is counterproductive, since nighttime temperatures below 50 degrees delay flowering.

VIBRANT VINCA

If you have a sun-baked container or garden spot where the soil dries out as soon as you turn your back, you can't go wrong with vinca.

Flowering vinca (*Catharanthus*, not to be confused with *Vinca minor*, the ground cover, aka creeping myrtle or periwinkle) is the quintessential low-maintenance annual. As long as you don't pamper vinca with too much food and water, or plant it where an automatic sprinkler keeps the leaves too wet, vinca looks fabulous all summer. No need to spend any time cutting off dying blossoms. Vinca is self-cleaning; spent flowers simply fall off by themselves.

And vinca is adaptable. Although it owes its fame to the ability to withstand sun-baked soil, this annual also puts on a respectable performance in partial shade. I depend on it in a spot with a difficult mix of morning shade and afternoon sun, where impatiens would be doomed.

You'll find a wide selection of vinca varieties in lavender, pink, purple, red, rose, or white wherever bedding plants are sold. I'm particularly fond of a deep violet vinca called First Kiss Blueberry, winner of an All-America Selections award. If you prefer to grow your own transplants, vinca is also easy to grow from seed, although it needs an eight- to ten-week head start indoors.

While vinca is normally trouble free, an unusually cool or wet summer can spell disaster. Disease encouraged by such conditions can turn leaves yellow, stunt plants, and eventually kill vinca. That's why I'm excited about Cora, a vigorous, disease-resistant vinca series that thrives even under adverse conditions. After extensive trials leading up to the Olympics in Beijing, Cora was selected for large display beds after outlasting competing varieties from all over the world.

The series offers unusually big flowers and sturdy, vigorous plants that grow 14 to 16 inches tall and about 2 feet wide.

BEST BET

Don't rush flowering vinca into the ground. If planted before the weather is warm and settled, vinca just sits and sulks. It might even succumb to root rot or other fungus disease.

ZANY ZINNIAS

There's nothing delicate about a zinnia, my husband, Don's, favorite flower. Although Don is a tree man who's more apt to see high tree branches than low flowers, the little patches of zinnias that brighten our vegetable garden never fail to win his admiration. He tells me he just likes the fact that such tough, coarse-textured plants are also so colorful.

So when cool-season peas and spinach vacate their space in the garden, I often scatter seeds of fancy zinnias to fill the empty spots. The big, bold blossoms look like dahlia or cactus flowers.

Zinnias grow quickly and easily from seed planted directly in the garden. In fact, that's the best way to grow them, since they resent transplanting and tall varieties left in plant packs too long seldom recover. Quick to flower, the plants keep blooming until frost.

Natives of Mexico, zinnias thrive in hot, dry weather in full sun. The seeds I sow in midsummer usually escape the powdery mildew and other fungus diseases that often take a heavy toll on zinnias planted in spring in this region.

To keep zinnias healthy as long as possible, avoid overhead watering. Thin tall, fancy-flowered varieties to allow 18 inches between plants so air can circulate freely. Remove flowers as soon as they fade. Or take the easy way out and plant disease-resistant varieties.

Although you won't find disease resistance in zinnias that have giant 4- to 6-inch flowers, there are smaller, mounding zinnias, like the award-winning Profusion series, that are seldom bothered by disease. Not long-stemmed beauties for cutting, they have simple, daisy-like flowers. These foot-tall zinnias are nevertheless perfect for a mixed border. Butterflies seem to prefer the single blossoms, too. And you'll never have to deadhead these zinnias. New leaves cover the fading blossoms as 2- to 3-inch, daisy-like flowers continue to open.

Zahara zinnias, a series with good disease-resistance, offer bigger blossoms on slightly taller plants.

Persian Carpet zinnias, a cultivar of the narrow-leaf species, not only stay healthy but also do a reliable job of reseeding themselves year after year. Their small flowers bloom in a cheerful mix of bright colors.

TOUGH EUPHORBIAS

Once in a while a new plant comes along that zooms to the top of the popularity charts as soon as gardeners realize it is much more than just another pretty face.

An annual euphorbia named Diamond Frost did just that. This no-fail plant thrives in sun or shade. It tolerates exceptional heat and drought and can even quickly revive itself from a near-death experience if you forget to water it. The plants seem to be nearly immune to pests and diseases.

In autumn, the show goes on despite the arrival of cold weather. If you can't bear to give it up for winter, Diamond Frost will even continue to bloom indoors as a houseplant. In winter, it's a hit when paired with holiday poinsettias.

Oh, and did I mention that this tough and durable plant is also gorgeous? Its sprays of tiny white flowers resembling baby's breath contrast with attractive dark-green foliage. The plant looks great whether you give it a pot of its own or combine it with other plants in a container.

Sold already blooming in small pots, Diamond Frost just keeps getting better. Eventually it grows about 18 inches tall and wide.

More recently, Breathless Blush with red-flushed foliage and Breathless White have joined the lineup of annual euphorbias. You can't grow any of these euphorbias from seed. Look for started plants at garden centers.

SHEARING FOR RENEWAL

When the lobelia stops blooming and some of its stems turn brown, I don't panic. That's just the way lobelia registers its displeasure with hot weather.

With a light shearing and enough water to keep the soil moist, I know the lobelia will bounce back in full bloom as soon as cool weather returns.

The sweet alyssum edging the garden path also languishes in the heat of summer. So, looking forward to a new round of its tiny, sweet-scented blossoms when cooler weather arrives in fall, I give my plants a heavy shearing to help them recharge. Rejuvenated, sweet alyssum often blooms until Thanksgiving or beyond.

Moss rose is a different story. The succulent leaves of this low creeper aren't fazed by the dog days of August. Unlike lobelia, moss rose thrives

in dry soil where little else will grow. Nevertheless, moss rose plants also benefit from a light summer shearing. Shearing removes the seed capsules, shaves a few inches off the height, and promotes a fresh round of the 1-inch blooms.

Other annuals that benefit from a light midsummer shearing when they start looking ratty include ageratum, China pinks, Swan River daisy, and trailing verbenas.

Cold-Weather Annuals

Of all cold-weather showoffs in our region, pansies are the best known. Blooming with large or small blossoms and with plain or fancy “faces,” they come in your choice of bright colors or pastels.

To keep pansies blooming longer, snap off faded flowers. When plants get leggy and stop blooming in hot weather, shear them back to about 2 inches and add fertilizer. Healthy plants will rebound in cool weather.

Thanks to work by plant breeders, we can now plant pansies in autumn in our Midwest gardens and enjoy those same pansies again in spring, just like southern gardeners have been doing for ages.

The keys to winter survival for pansies in our region: a spot with good drainage where water doesn’t stand, and a mulch such as shredded leaves pulled up snug around plants after the ground freezes.

Varieties with medium-size flowers are more apt to survive winter than giant-flowered pansies. I’ve had good luck with Inspire, Maxim, Universal Plus, and Cool Wave pansies.

COLD-TOLERANT NEWCOMERS

Choosing annuals for cool-weather containers? Don’t stop with pansies. Thanks to some cold-tolerant newcomers, spring and autumn gardening in the Midwest offers many other exciting possibilities.

Diascia, or twinspur, for example. My diascia plants amaze me by producing a continuous show of tubular flowers late in the season, sometimes even lasting until mid-December.

A member of the snapdragon family, diascia comes in apricot, coral, peach, pink, rose, and white. Many varieties have a sprawling form that combines well with other plants and looks nice in a hanging basket.

Plant tags often recommend a site with full sun for diascia. But I've discovered that my plants are more likely to survive the searing heat of a typical Midwest summer if grown in a spot sheltered from the hot afternoon sun.

Nemesia, also a member of the snapdragon family, is another hot new plant for cool-weather containers.

A small plant no more than a foot tall, nemesia takes a break from blooming in hot weather. But once temperatures cool down in fall, it's covered with small, snapdragon-like blossoms of pink, purple, red, white, or yellow. Compact Innocence, a white-flowered variety, emits a powerfully sweet perfume.

Nemesia grows well in sun or partial shade.

Cape daisies (*Osteospermum*) are also great candidates for spring or autumn color: If you wonder all summer why yours aren't blooming, you'll find out in the fall. Like a lot of us, they eagerly wait for some chilly weather.

Wonderful for bouquets, cape daisies have big daisy-like flowers in many bright and muted colors. Choose cream, magenta, mauve, orange, peach, pink, purple, white, or yellow. Many varieties have azure-blue centers.

Also known as African daisies, cape daisies bloom best when grown in full sun and poor but well-drained soil. The more you cut, the more they bloom.

AUTUMN RENAISSANCE

With the arrival of crisp autumn weather, heat-loving annuals like vinca and impatiens decline, then die at the first touch of frost. But the show isn't over yet. Fall temperatures are just the boost some garden flowers need for an end-of-season burst of color.

In autumn, the snapdragons that bloomed admirably in my garden in spring, then languished in the heat, are once again covered with colorful spikes.

Calendulas, or pot marigolds, bloom in yellow and orange, sometimes with a tint of copper or red. The plants can survive repeated frost and often bloom through Thanksgiving.

Annual blue salvias are a special delight in autumn. I love the bright blue spikes of tubular flowers and smooth, soft, gray-green leaves.

Because I allow some seeds to drop to the ground every autumn, I enjoy informal groups of self-sown blue salvias nestled among earlier-blooming perennials.

Cup flowers make pint-size edging plants and are also ideal for draping over the sides of containers. Their blue or white, 1-inch flowers bloom all summer, but they really shine when the weather cools. Flowering often lasts late into the fall.

COLD-WEATHER ANNUALS

Cape daisy (*Osteospermum* hybrids)

China pinks (*Dianthus chinensis*)

Cup flower (*Nierembergia hippomanica*)

Mealy-cup sage (*Salvia farinacea*)

Nemesia (*N. strumosa*)

Ornamental cabbage and kale (*Brassica oleracea*)

Pansy (*Viola* × *wittrockiana*)

Pot marigold (*Calendula officinalis*)

Snapdragon (*Antirrhinum majus*)

Stock (*Matthiola incana*)

Twinspur diascia (*D. hybrids*)

STOCKS YOU CAN GROW

If you've never heard of garden stocks, ask your grandmother. They're old-fashioned flowers, so named because of their thick stems.

Stocks are beginning to earn a place in modern gardens, too, as more folks discover their sweet cinnamon scent and beautiful flowering spikes filled with double blossoms. Best of all, stocks are a cool-season flower you can enjoy before the weather is warm enough for most bedding plants.

There are many different kinds of stocks, ranging from 8-inch dwarfs to varieties 2 feet tall. One type often grown in today's gardens is called ten-week stocks, because it bursts into bloom about ten weeks after the seeds are planted. The foot-tall plants are very fragrant and come in shades of pink, purple, and white.

It's easy to grow stocks from seed. Just firm the seeds onto the soil without covering them, because the seeds need light to sprout. Give seeds a six-week head start indoors, starting seeds in individual pots. As the popularity of stocks continues to grow, no doubt transplants will become easier to find.

Stocks are perfect for planting in containers near the door, so you can enjoy their early spring color and fragrance, along with pansies, snapdragons, China pinks, and other cold-hardy annuals. During spring's cool weather, all perform best in full sun.

FLOWERING CABBAGES AND KALES

After the first fall frost, flowering cabbages and kales are in their prime. The colorful leaves of these cool-weather plants usually last at least through Thanksgiving, often beyond.

Deciding which ones are cabbages and which are kales depends on whom you ask, since the names are often used interchangeably. Many gardeners settle it by calling a variety that forms a head, an ornamental cabbage; one that grows in a clump of curly or fringed leaves, an ornamental kale.

Both are bicolored with splashes of red, pink, white, green, or purple, their outer leaves usually darker than the contrasting centers.

Some gardeners delight in planting these ornamentals from seed in spring and nurturing them through the season. It's rewarding and inexpensive, but there's a catch: You have to be willing to spray or dust the plants all summer long or the leaves will be riddled by cabbage worms. And there's nothing very ornamental about that! I usually take the easy way out and buy them as bedding plants in early autumn.

BEST BET

Ornamental cabbages and kales are edible, but vegetable varieties taste better. Go ahead and use leaves of one of the ornamental varieties for an attractive garnish, but stick to the vegetable types for your salads.

OLD-FASHIONED PINKS

Thanks to the work of plant breeders, an old-fashioned garden annual is better than ever. China pinks, long appreciated for their cool-weather performance, now come in hybrids that have built-in heat tolerance, too.

I watch in amazement as a hybrid called Corona Cherry Magic blooms again and again in a window box despite periods of hot temperatures.

An All-America Selections winner, Corona Cherry Magic owes its “magic” to the variable coloring of its flowers. Sometimes they’re cherry red, sometimes lavender. Other times, you’ll see almost a tie-dyed effect or a mosaic of both colors, marked with stripes, flecks, or contrasting centers. Corona Cherry Magic grows about 8 inches tall with flowers that are often twice as big as the 1-inch blossoms of most other varieties of pinks.

The Ideal series offers heat-tolerant pinks in your choice of a full range of colors, including solids and bicolors, on 10-inch-tall plants. If you’re looking for more compact plants, the Super Parfait series grows only 6 to 8 inches tall.

As cooler fall temperatures arrive, expect all varieties of pinks to thrive. Unlike more tender annuals, pinks easily survive light frosts. Try them in fall containers as partners for other cold-tolerant annuals such as pansies, twinspurs, and pot marigolds.

With their bright, cheerful colors and a sometimes-spicy fragrance, pinks have low, mounded shapes and charming fringed petals that look like they’ve been “pinked” with shears. These short plants are a longtime favorite for growing along the paths of a cottage garden.

Pinks thrive in full sun in well-drained soil. Allow room for good air circulation and add mulch to help keep the roots cool.

When most of the flowers fade, give the plants a light shearing to encourage reblooms.

When conditions are just right, annual pinks sometimes behave more like short-lived perennials, surviving for a winter or two. I’ve even had plants overwinter in a container on occasion. If old flowers aren’t sheared before seeds form, pinks may also self-sow, producing a new crop of plants of varying heights and colors.

Annuals for Shade

If you have a garden in the shade, chances are you already love impatiens. As easy to grow as they are beautiful, impatiens bloom profusely in spots too shady for most other annuals.

Choosing which kinds of impatiens to grow is probably more complicated than actually growing them. The choice of colors, sizes, and forms is expanding rapidly, with many exciting new varieties.

You can find impatiens in every color of the rainbow except true blue. Some have bicolored blossoms, with dark-edged petals or white stars. Leaf color may be bright green or dark bronze. Flower form varies, too, from single to semi-double to fully double flowers.

Impatiens are easy to grow from seed but need an early start indoors in late February or early March for good-sized transplants ready to set out in May.

If you prefer to buy plants, you'll find a good selection of impatiens offered as bedding plants in spring.

After danger of spring frost, plant impatiens outdoors in a spot protected from sun. Plants bloom best in filtered shade, such as beneath a tree with high branches. Add compost to the soil but hold off on nitrogen fertilizers, which produce more height and less flowers.

Impatiens love the Midwest's humid summer weather and thrive in a moist but well-drained soil. Pests and diseases are seldom a problem. The continuously blooming plants always look neat and clean, since dead blossoms simply drop off on their own.

If you want to plant impatiens under a mature tree, plant the flowers in containers sunk into the ground. That way, the impatiens won't have to compete with the tree's roots for water and nutrients.

The height of impatiens plants is affected primarily by variety, but distance between plants affects height, too; plants grow taller the closer together you put them. Generally, spacing plants 8 to 10 inches apart will produce a nice display.

For containers that get morning sun and afternoon shade, New Guinea hybrid impatiens are ideal. Robust plants with large flowers and colorful foliage, they are quite showy.

I count on the Fusion series of impatiens for spectacular plants that are always hummingbird favorites. Not your average impatiens, they have exotic, almost tropical-looking, cup-shaped flowers in your choice of apricot, coral, peach, or yellow. Growing up to 16 inches tall and wide, the plants are quite a bit larger than ordinary impatiens.

What other annuals thrive in the shade? Torenia, also called the wish-bone flower, is one of my favorites. Its snapdragon-like blossoms come in pink, purple, and yellow. Today's varieties are vastly improved over the old seed-grown varieties I used to grow.

Bush violet has delicate, trumpet-shaped flowers of blue-purple or white.

Wax begonias, which come in many colorful choices, tolerate the heat and humidity of a Midwest summer exceptionally well.

Veranda helmet flower has bicolored blue-purple flower spikes reminiscent of its sun-loving relatives, the salvias. The glossy, dark-green foliage is attractive, too.

Maracas Brazilian fireworks is a delightfully unique tropical plant from South America. Each exotic bloom stalk has a striking and long-lasting hot-pink central core punctuated by small lavender-purple flowers. The plants have fantastic foliage, too, with silver markings on the long, angular, deep-green leaves. Only about 8 inches tall, they bloom beautifully even in deep shade.

BEST BET

To thwart the fungus disease known as impatiens downy mildew, select only plants that have healthy, dark-green leaves. Immediately remove and bag any impatiens plant that shows early signs of the disease: pale green foliage with subtle mottling, leaves turned downward, and white downy growth on the underside of the leaves. Rotate impatiens with other shade-loving annuals such as wax begonias and coleus. In beds with partial sun, plant New Guinea impatiens and SunPatiens; both appear to be immune to impatiens downy mildew.

ANNUALS FOR SHADE

Brazilian fireworks (*Porphyrocoma pohliana*)

Bush violet (*Browallia speciosa*)

Coleus (*Solenostemon scutellarioides*)

Dragon Wing begonia (*Begonia* hybrid)

Helmet flower (*Scutellaria javanica*)

Impatiens (*I. walleriana*)

New Guinea impatiens (*I. hawkeri*)

Wax begonia (*B. semperflorens-cultorum*)

Wishbone flower (*Torenia* hybrids)

Favorites for Sun

Compared to the list of shade-loving annuals, the list of plants that will thrive in full sun is long. It includes most of the region's longtime favorites like petunias, marigolds, sunflowers, verbenas, and geraniums. Many newer annuals, such as fan flower and calibrachoa, also love the sun.

PRETTY PETUNIAS

Amidst all the jokes about Midwest weather, petunias get the last laugh.

These colorful annuals can take the heat. Once established, they stand up well to drought. Petunias tolerate cold, too, blooming continuously until the first hard frost. And though they look bedraggled after a heavy rain, most kinds of petunias recover their good looks quickly once they dry.

Petunias' trumpet-shaped blossoms come in a wider range of colors than any other flower. You also have the choice of plain or ruffled, single or double, solid or bicolored. Some varieties have contrasting veins, fringed edges, or white-tipped petals.

Along with their colorful flowers all summer long, many petunias — especially older varieties — add a sweet fragrance to the evening air. Butterflies and hummingbirds adore the flowers.

Today's gardeners can choose from trailing varieties ideal for hanging baskets and window boxes, spreading types that quickly carpet the ground with color, and petite plants just the right size to grow in

a bowl. Closely related calibrachoas, often called miniature petunias, offer dainty petunia-like blossoms that are perfect for planting in pots.

No matter what type of petunias you choose, they all prefer plenty of sun. All day sun is best; half day is acceptable. They like moist soil but also require good drainage. While many kinds tolerate poor soil, the vigorous spreading petunias, like the popular Wave series, have big appetites. If you're growing them in a container, add fertilizer to the water every two weeks. If you plant your petunias in a garden bed, add compost plus a light sprinkle of a slow-release organic fertilizer at planting time.

What can go wrong with petunias? The most common problem is the plants' tendency to get "leggy." Pinch back a few of the longest stems every couple of weeks to keep the plants looking their best. If you're leaving for a vacation, pinch back all the stems to new, vigorous growth. By the time you get home, the petunias will be lush and beautiful again.

Like tomatoes and potatoes, petunias belong to the nightshade family. To lessen problems with disease, choose a spot for your petunias where no members of the family have grown recently.

Petunias, like people, are more apt to suffer from disease if stressed. Reducing stress for petunias means making sure they have enough food and water. Don't overdo, though; soggy soil encourages root rot.

If a petunia develops leaf spots or mottled foliage, remove the plant before your other petunias are infected.

If flowering suddenly stops, tobacco budworms may be to blame.

BEST BET

If the foliage of petunias or calibrachoas turns light green, the plants are probably announcing their need for fertilizer. Add a few drops of acid fertilizer each time you water. Besides providing nutrients, an acid fertilizer also helps counter the effect of frequent additions of tap water, which is alkaline. Better yet, install an attractive rain barrel to collect rainwater from the roof and use that to water your container plants.

Handpicking the worms at dusk, when the caterpillars are most active, is one of the best options available to the home gardener.

VIGOROUS VERBENAS

Plant breeders have been hard at work, bringing us a wide choice of colors, sizes, and habits in verbenas. Some varieties are grown from seed, others from cuttings. Some have fine, feathery foliage, others broader leaves.

Small upright verbenas, such as the ‘Quartz’ series, grow 8 to 10 inches tall, ideal for window boxes. Others have a trailing form, ideal for cascading over the sides of a container or wall, or covering the ground with a carpet of color. But all have large, showy clusters of tiny flowers that add color to the garden for months on end.

Verbenas respond well to mulch, which preserves moisture and helps keep the roots cool. Remove spent flowers on upright types to promote continued blooming. If trailing types stop blooming in hot weather, shear them lightly.

In 1993, a verbenas named Imagination won an All-America Selections award. One of the first of the trailing types, it has violet-blue flowers and fine, lacy foliage on branches that sprawl 2 feet in all directions. Easy to grow from seed, it’s generally free of disease and inexpensive enough to use lavishly in the garden as a ground cover or in hanging baskets and other containers.

In recent years, many other new trailing types have joined Imagination. The ever-increasing choice of colors in trailing verbenas now includes lilac, light or dark pink, rose, purple, and light blue.

BEST BET

Stressed verbenas are prone to powdery mildew. Pale-colored leaves are often the first sign of this fungus disease. Soon white powdery patches develop, then the leaves turn yellow and die. To help prevent mildew, allow plenty of room for good air circulation. Don’t let the soil dry out. Remove any infected stems and destroy severely infected plants.

SUN-LOVING GERANIUMS

Geraniums are survivors. They're the only annuals I've ever seen that can withstand the horror of growing in a pot filled with clay soil and left to bake in the sun.

Of course, geraniums perform best when treated to more loving care. But there's no question that geraniums are one of the easiest and most adaptable annuals.

The only thing geraniums absolutely won't tolerate is "wet feet." The plants always rebel if their soil stays soggy.

If geraniums could have their pick of growing conditions, what else would they choose? Full sun for at least half a day. Rich, well-drained soil. And water when the soil surface feels dry to the touch, with half-strength fertilizer added every second or third watering.

Technically, these favorite bedding plants belong to the genus *Pelargonium*; the scientific name *Geranium* belongs to a group of closely related perennials. By the time the scientists who name plants figured out they had made a mistake in grouping the plants together, the name had already stuck.

There are many types of tender geraniums. Zonal geraniums, named for the horseshoe-shaped band of color on their leaves, are the type we all know best. Red is still the most popular color, but pink, lavender, lilac, salmon, rose, and white are gaining. These pastel-colored blossoms seem to glow in the evening light, welcoming you outdoors at the end of the day.

Fancy-leaf varieties offer chartreuse or multicolored foliage, sometimes ruffled or shiny, sometimes with glorious scent. They combine beautifully with other plants in large containers.

Regal, or Martha Washington, geraniums are much admired for their huge, showy blossoms. But they're finicky to grow in the Midwest, where summer nights are too hot for their liking.

The beautiful trailing ivy geraniums, with leaves that resemble true ivy, are finicky, too. When hot weather arrives, they often stop blooming. A better bet for hanging baskets in our region: alpine ivies, floribundas, or cascade geraniums. All bloom better than ivy geraniums when our summers turn hot.

To keep all types of geraniums looking their best and also help prevent disease and pest problems, regularly pick off and destroy any yellow leaves and dead flowers.

If flowering temporarily ceases during a summer heat wave, it's often because geraniums don't like the hot temperature. You might be able to help by moving potted plants into the shade on hot afternoons.

Tobacco budworms are a more troubling cause for lack of flowers. Early signs of trouble: buds with tiny holes surrounded by a substance that resembles sawdust, and flowers with ragged-looking petals.

To control budworms, handpicking is one of the best options for the home gardener. Check plants at dusk, when the caterpillars are most active. While young caterpillars are likely to be busy tunneling through small buds and stems, larger caterpillars should be easy to spot chewing holes in petals, buds, and leaves. Look for striped caterpillars of almost any color, including red, dark brown, and green.

If buds dry up before they open, the problem is sometimes blamed on low humidity in western regions of this country. Here in the Midwest, though, low humidity is not usually a problem unless, of course, you're trying to grow a potted geranium in an air-conditioned house. Instead, the more likely culprits are tiny insects called thrips. To check, pull open a bud and inspect the base of the petals for the pests.

To control thrips, pick off and destroy any dried-up buds, then spray the plants with insecticidal soap.

If the leaves have water-soaked spots that eventually turn brown and corky, you're probably overwatering.

Sunken brown or tan spots on the leaves are a sign of a bacterial disease.

BEST BET

It goes without saying that you should choose only geraniums with healthy foliage to bring in for winter or to use for taking cuttings. If you've had a budworm problem outdoors, it would be well worth the time to repot that prized geranium in fresh soil before bringing it in for winter.

It's often spread by splashing water, or whiteflies. Keep geranium foliage dry whenever possible and control whiteflies with insecticidal soap.

If large angular patches on the leaves die and stems shrivel and turn black, destroy the infected plant.

WEAVE MAGIC WITH MARIGOLDS

You don't have to have a green thumb to succeed with marigolds. As long as you plant them in a sunny garden spot, marigolds are some of the easiest flowers to grow.

Many folks buy marigolds in plant packs, but you can also plant marigold seeds right in your garden. The big seeds are easy to handle and quick to sprout. Gardeners who are willing to start with seeds can choose from a much bigger selection of varieties.

When I think of marigolds, I usually picture yellow or orange flowers. But marigolds also come in burgundy, red, and creamy white, with many variations in between.

Most trouble-free of all marigolds are the French varieties, which grow only 6 to 12 inches tall. I'm partial to one called 'Golden Gates', an All-America Selections winner that features gold and maroon bicolored blooms twice the size of most other French marigolds.

African marigolds such as the 'Inca' series grow into big shrubby plants, with carnation-like blossoms.

A third type, called signet marigold, doesn't even look like a marigold. The lacy foliage doesn't smell like one, either; the delightful fragrance is more like that of a lemon. The plants, only about 8 inches tall, produce masses of dainty, single flowers. Lemon Gem is one of the best.

Marigolds don't generally suffer from problems, but if the weather turns hot and dry, look out for spider mites. These tiny pests suck sap

BEST BET

Gray mold, or botrytis, may cover marigolds' decaying leaves, stems, and spent flowers with spots and mold, especially in cool, wet weather. To help control gray mold, regularly remove old flowers from the plants.

out of the leaves, leaving the plants looking pale and lifeless and covered with tiny webs. Discouraging spider mites is easy; just hose the plants off with water every day or two.

If leaves wilt, then yellow and die, a fungus that attacks the roots and spreads into the stems is the likely culprit. This problem is most common when tall varieties of marigolds grow in waterlogged soil. Remove any plants that show such symptoms, and don't plant marigolds in the same place again, since the fungus remains in the soil indefinitely.

Aster yellows can turn marigold leaves yellow and stunt the plants. If you see a plant showing such symptoms, pull it out and dispose of it before leafhoppers can spread the infection to healthy plants.

More often than not, marigolds perform perfectly, brightening Mid-west gardens for months with their bright blossoms.

SUNFLOWERS

When I picture a sunflower, it's gigantic and golden-yellow, perched atop a tall stalk. But as I look around at the variety of sunflowers blooming in gardens, I realize it's time to update my mental image.

These days, sunflowers are also red, bronze, orange, white, or pale yellow, with centers of green, black, brown, or yellow.

Compared to most other flowers, all sunflowers are big. But by sunflower standards, the flowers of some varieties are downright small, measuring only 4 inches across. Some of the plants still tower over my head, but now you can also choose from a full range of smaller sizes, including 16-inch dwarfs that are small enough to grow in pots.

Besides the traditional single-stalk sunflowers that produce one flower per plant, there are also bushy varieties with many side branches that have several dozen blooms on a single plant.

Perhaps the most startling change in sunflowers is the introduction of plants that produce no pollen and therefore no seed. This type was bred primarily for the cut-flower industry. The advantages are that the flowers are long lasting, and there's no pollen to stain the tablecloth or other indoor surfaces. Pollen-free sunflowers are also good garden performers, blooming over a long period. And without the weight of developing seeds, the flowers don't droop.

Most sunflowers, however, still produce seed, no matter how small,

and that's a plus if you love birds. It's a treat to watch goldfinches flock to the plants as soon as the seeds begin to ripen.

If you hope to eat the seeds yourself, though, the best variety is still Mammoth Russian. Its giant flowers produce lots of big seeds. As soon as the seeds start to ripen, clip off the seed heads, leaving a foot-long stem attached to each flower head. Then, hang the flowers by their stems in a protected place, such as a garage, where the birds can't get to them.

Better yet, lay the flowers face down on a sheet of screen wire suspended from the garage ceiling. As the sunflowers dry, any seeds that drop will be caught by the screen.

After several weeks, rub your hand over each head to remove the remaining seeds.

LISIANTHUS

In the southern Great Plains, Texas bluebells were once a common sight. Now this American native is turning heads in Midwest gardens.

Known in our region as lisianthus, the blossoms are prized both for their exquisite beauty and their long life as cut flowers. Buds shaped like rosebuds open to silky flowers that look something like poppies.

In recent years, lisianthus has attracted the attention of hybridizers. Now, besides the original purple-blue, you can choose from more than a dozen colors and bicolors. Heights vary greatly, too, from dwarf plants ideal for growing in window boxes to long-stemmed beauties with sprays of blossoms that stand 3 feet tall.

My favorite for a steady supply of beautiful blue flowers to fill my

BEST BET

Insects sometimes eat the insides of stored sunflower kernels. There are two easy ways to prevent this damage. Bake the loose seeds for ten minutes in a 250-degree oven, or put the seeds in a plastic bag in the freezer for several days. Then store the seeds in a closed container. To roast sunflower seeds for a snack, spread them on a cookie sheet and bake at 350 degrees until the seeds swell and the hulls crack.

vases is a lisianthus called Forever Blue. This compact, 12-inch-tall variety earned an All-America Selections award for its dense branching that produces bountiful blooms all summer.

Lisianthus grows best in full sun but also tolerates partial shade. If the summer turns out to be hot and dry, so much the better. Flowers cut for bouquets will last a week or two. If you prefer to enjoy the flowers in the garden, snip off spent flowers to keep the plants looking their best and promote continued blooming.

You can grow lisianthus from seed, but you have to start them indoors by mid-February at the latest. These seeds need warmth and light to sprout. Transplants are also readily available in spring to plant after danger of frost.

For best results, plant lisianthus in soil that is rich, moist, and well drained. The plants grow very slowly in spring, but you needn't worry: once hot summer weather arrives, lisianthus speeds up.

Pests and diseases are seldom a problem. If aphids congregate on the leaves or buds, spray with insecticidal soap.

To make tall types of lisianthus grow bushier, pinch off growing tips several times early in the season. Otherwise, these varieties may require staking.

DEPENDABLE POPPIES

If you start itching to get into the garden in early spring, grab a packet of poppy seeds and get going. March is perfect for planting poppies. You don't even have to wait for the soil to be dry enough to rake. Just scatter the seeds on bare soil or even on top of the snow, allowing the seeds to settle into the soil as the snow melts.

Poppies thrive with little care, performing best in dry soil with no extra fertilizer. Sowing seeds where you want poppies to grow works best, because poppies don't take readily to transplanting.

Just ninety days after sowing seeds of most kinds of annual poppies, expect the first nodding flower buds to open into silky flowers, held high on their wiry stems.

Corn poppies, the beloved scarlet flowers from the famous World War I poem, "In Flanders Fields," are still popular today in informal cottage gardens. Shirley poppies, another longtime favorite, often have double

flowers with extra petals and come in various blends of pink, red, rose, salmon, and white. There are also frilly, peony-flowered poppies that bloom in pink, purple, red, or white.

Iceland poppies are usually described as perennial, but here in the Midwest I think it's more accurate to call them annuals. Our summer heat, not winter's cold, is what stands in the way of their long life. Fortunately, they make fine annuals; seeds sown in early spring will bloom the first summer. If the plants survive to bloom another year, consider it a bonus.

Usually about a foot tall, Iceland poppies are shorter than most other poppies. Their fragrant flowers come in a full range of colors that includes cream and yellow, as well as more common poppy colors.

Poppies are prolific self-seeders. I used to let all the seeds drop to the ground. The result: a beautiful cut-flower garden in June, followed by lots of empty space after the poppies gave up in the heat of summer.

Nowadays, I clip off most of the pods before they dump their seeds, while allowing the pods on my prettiest plants to mature. The result: my own strain of beautiful poppies, in my favorite colors, in just the right number.

ANNUALS FOR SUN

Angel's trumpet (*Datura metel*)
Bachelor buttons (*Centaurea cyanus*)
Calibrachoa (*C. × hybrida*)
Castor bean (*Ricinus communis*)
Celosia (*C. argentea*)
Cosmos (*Cosmos* species)

BEST BET

All poppies make wonderful cut flowers, provided you stop the flow of milky sap that seeps from their stems after cutting. Searing the cut stem over a flame or dipping the end in boiling water should do the trick. The more often you cut, the longer poppies bloom, with the show often lasting six to eight weeks.

Cup flower (*Nierembergia hippomanica*)
 Dahlberg daisy (*Thymophylla tenuiloba*)
 Egyptian star-flower (*Pentas lanceolata*)
 Fan flower (*Scaevola aemula*)
 Floss flower (*Ageratum houstonianum*)
 Four o'clock (*Mirabilis jalapa*)
 Gazania (*G. rigens*)
 Globe amaranth (*Gomphrena globosa*)
 Immortelle (*Xeranthemum annuum*)
 Kiss-me-over-the-garden-gate (*Persicaria
orientalis*, syn. *Polygonum orientale*)
 Lantana (*L. camara*)
 Larkspur (*Consolida ajacis*)
 Love-in-a-mist (*Nigella damascena*)
 Lisianthus (*Eustoma grandiflorum*)
 Marigold (*Tagetes* species)
 Mealy-cup sage (*Salvia farinacea*)
 Melampodium (*M. divaricatum*, syn. *M. paludosum*)
 Mexican sunflower (*Tithonia rotundifolia*)
 Moss rose (*Portulaca grandiflora*)
 Ornamental pepper (*Capsicum annuum*)
 Petunia (*P. × hybrida*)
 Poppy (*Papaver nudicaule*, *P. rhoeas*, and *P. somniferum*)
 Pot marigold (*Calendula officinalis*)
 Scarlet sage (*Salvia coccinea*)
 Spider flower (*Cleome hassleriana*)
 Sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*)
 Summer cypress (*Bassia scoparia*, syn. *Kochia scoparia*)
 Sweet alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*)
 Verbena (*V. × hybrida*)
 Vinca (*Catharanthus roseus*)
 Zinnia (*Zinnia* species and hybrids)

Easy-Care Candidates for Containers

Growing flowers in containers doesn't have to be difficult. Some plants are so fail-proof, they threaten to turn all brown thumbs green.

Dragon Wing begonia, for example. Whether I plant it in sun or shade, I know this heat-lover will sail through the summer without any problems. It's ideal for large containers, hanging baskets, or window boxes where the sturdy, foot-tall plant can show off its huge, shiny leaves and dangling clusters of red or pink flowers.

My appreciation for lantana as an easy container plant goes back many years, soon after our move to the country. That dry summer, hordes of grasshoppers ate just about every plant in sight and even nibbled some holes in our new nylon window screens. But they didn't touch the lantanas.

I'm guessing it's the citrus scent of lantana's bright-green leaves that puts off insects but, whatever it is, I've yet to see a lantana leaf serve as lunch for any pest. The big clusters of tiny flowers, on the other hand, serve as a magnet for butterflies. To make the most of the butterfly show, it's fun to grow a lantana in a container you can easily see from the house.

Flower colors include orange, pink, red, white, and yellow as well as wild combinations of mixed colors.

Where it never freezes, lantanas grow like a shrub. In the Midwest they make great heat-tolerant container plants, available in your choice of trailing or upright habit. I save my lantanas year after year, growing them under a fluorescent light in the basement in winter. Because I have limited indoor space, I downsize plants to be overwintered indoors: I whack off a large portion of the roots so the remaining root system will fit in a 6-inch pot, then remove an equal portion of the stems and leaves.

Hot peppers are happiest when the summer weather turns brutal. Some of my other plants look droopy, but not the handsome ornamental peppers growing in full sun in a planter on my hot concrete driveway. My favorite: Black Pearl, an All-America Selections winner that has pure-black foliage and dense clusters of shiny black peppers.

HANGING BASKETS

With flower breeders coming up with so many wonderful new cascading plants, it's no wonder that the popularity of hanging baskets is soaring.

Besides the usual upright types of flowering vinca, we now also have varieties with a spreading habit, perfect in hanging baskets or for softening the edge of a large container. The Mediterranean series and Cora Cascade hybrids offer trailing types in your choice of many colors, including apricot, lilac, magenta, and rose.

Like other varieties of vinca, these spreading varieties offer maintenance-free plants that are perfect for planting in a hot, sunny spot.

Bacopa, a relative newcomer, has already worked its way to the top of my list of favorites to use in baskets on my deck. With the deck's eastern exposure, the plants thrive with morning sun followed by shade in the heat of the afternoon. Bacopa is easy to grow, provided the soil doesn't dry out.

Fan flower is a real beauty, with dozens of blue-violet, fan-shaped flowers on dark green stems tumbling over the sides of a hanging basket. I've had good luck planting it in either full sun or partial shade. A native of the hot, dry climate of Australia, fan flower has no trouble thriving in the heat of a Midwest summer.

Calibrachoa produces masses of flowers that look like little petunias. The plants do well in full sun or partial shade and seem to be able to take whatever the weather dishes out, from searing summer heat to frosty fall temperatures. Some varieties are upright, but trailing types work best in baskets.

Even snapdragons now come in trailing forms that are perfect for hanging baskets. Look for baskets of cascading snapdragon varieties such as Luminaire at garden centers. Cascadia and Lampion are two color mixes you can grow from seed, but they'll require an extra-early start indoors.

Trailing types of torenia, the wishbone flower, are ideal for baskets in the shade. Summer Wave Blue is my favorite.

Fanfare impatiens offer another great choice for shady baskets. With spreading stems covered with bright blooms from their centers to their tips, these colorful cascading plants come in blush, fuchsia, lavender, and orange.

Focus on Foliage

Purple. Chartreuse. Silver. Red. Yellow. Pink. White. You can have them all in the garden, without a single flower.

Plants with colorful foliage are in style, just like they were in Victorian times, only now we have a larger selection. I especially enjoy pairing a couple of plants with contrasting foliage colors in containers. Then the pots look great even if nothing in them is blooming.

Persian shield is one of my favorites. Who could resist its deep purple leaves with a beautiful metallic silver sheen?

An old-fashioned plant recently rediscovered by gardeners, Persian shield will grow 3 feet tall if you let it. Frequent pinching of the growing tips not only produces a more compact plant but also encourages new leaves that show off with the brightest purple.

In the Midwest, Persian shield performs best with morning sun and afternoon shade, and enough water to keep the soil moist.

Few gardeners had ever heard of licorice plant (*Helichrysum*) until recent years, but now its felt-like foliage is frequently seen weaving its way through container plantings. It comes in your choice of large or small leaves that are silver, chartreuse, or variegated. Plant licorice in sun or partial shade.

Numerous varieties of plectranthus, all cousins of the once-popular Swedish ivy, come in an array of colors. Like Swedish ivy, all are easy to grow in sun or partial shade.

One is called simply Golden, though it actually looks more chartreuse than gold. It combines beautifully with dark colors in a mixed container.

BEST BET

When the weather turns hot, tropical plants thrive. Chances are you already have some houseplants that will add to the scene when moved outdoors with other tropical specimens. For bold, seasonal ground covers, take cuttings of any of your vining houseplants with colorful foliage, such as purple heart, wandering Jew, or pothos. They're also ideal candidates for mixing together with flowering plants in containers.

Silver Shield is a sturdy, 2-foot-tall upright plant with big silver leaves that glow in the moonlight.

The leaves of Mona Lavender are purplish green on top, dark purple on the underside. While most kinds of plectranthus are grown primarily for their foliage, Mona Lavender also delights me with abundant dark-lavender flower spikes in late summer and early fall.

This is just a sampling of the many varieties of plectranthus available. Watch for them when you're plant shopping, and you'll be amazed at the possibilities. All are easy, even for beginners. And thanks to their scented foliage, they are usually ignored by rabbits and deer.

COLORFUL COLEUS

Beloved by Victorians but then nearly forgotten, coleus is now coming back strong.

No wonder! Newer coleus varieties thrive in sun as well as shade. And this tropical plant boasts colorful leaves as showy as any flower . . . without any wait or worry. Equally good in the garden or in containers, coleus is easy to grow and seldom bothered by pests or diseases.

Some of the old coleus favorites are back in garden centers along with some spectacular new ones. The leaves may be smooth or frilly, big or little, plain or deeply cut. And the colors are gorgeous: plum with splashes of pink, burgundy with yellow centers, yellow with red flecks, and dark red with a yellow outline, to name a few.

Some, such as the giant-leaf Kong series and the dramatic red-and-purple Black Dragon, are easy to grow from seed started indoors about two months before the last spring frost. Most kinds of modern varieties, though, are offered only as started plants, not seeds. These are the varieties most likely to grow well in full sun. Coleus plants with thick leaves and dark colors also tend to be good candidates for growing in full sun.

BEST BET

To keep coleus at its best, pinch out any seed heads that form. Feel free to also pinch off the growing tips to keep your coleus any size and shape you desire.

You can plant coleus outside any time after the danger of frost has passed. The plants love heat and look great all summer long until fall frost.

If you can't bear to lose your favorite varieties to winter cold, bring in plants or take cuttings to grow indoors.

Easy, Old-Fashioned Annuals

Old-fashioned annuals are not only interesting plants, they have intriguing names, too.

Take painted tongue (*Salpiglossis sinuata*), for example. A South American native, painted tongue has been grown in our country since pioneer days.

I love painted tongue's rich and varied color combinations of blue, purple, rose, red, violet, and yellow, with contrasting veins and centers or exquisite stained-glass patterns. The 2-inch, funnel-shaped flowers bloom from midsummer to frost on 2-foot-tall plants. In bouquets, the blossoms are long lasting and easily admired at close range.

You can plant seeds of painted tongue in the garden, but — for earlier blooms — I prefer to give them a head start indoors. In March, I sow the seeds on the surface of damp potting soil in containers. After the last spring frost, I space the seedlings 12 inches apart in a sunny site, then stick a small, twiggy branch into the ground beside each plant for support.

Looking for other unusual annuals that can spice up your flower beds? The dangling, reddish-purple tassels of love-lies-bleeding (*Amaranthus caudatus*) never fail to make me smile.

Because the plants reach a height of 4 feet or more, I delegate them to a spot by the garden fence. Dangling over the fence, the pendulous flowers are real show-offs. And, although the stems are quite thick and usually self-supporting, the fence sometimes comes in handy for tying up plants downed by a storm.

A sun-lover, love-lies-bleeding is one of those undemanding annuals that actually performs best if the soil isn't too rich.

Another plant with a softer look but an equally fascinating old-fashioned name is love-in-a-mist (*Nigella damascena*). Pretty, 1-inch flowers of blue or white (and, less commonly, pink) nestle in ferny

foliage about a foot tall. Just as nice, I think, are the rounded, decorative seed pods that are both interesting to see in the garden and long lasting in dried arrangements.

Love-in-a-mist is easy to grow in full sun and is a dependable self-seeder.

Sweet scabious (*Scabiosa atropurpurea*) has rounded pincushion flowers on plants that grow 2 or 3 feet tall. Besides the original, almost-black flower once called “mourning bride,” today’s colors include blue, lavender, pink, and rose.

Like the closely related perennial pincushion flower, sweet scabious is excellent for cutting and attractive to butterflies. The plants grow 2 or 3 feet tall and do best in full sun. Start seeds indoors four to six weeks before the last expected spring frost.

Mignonette (*Reseda odorata*) is grown not for its beauty but for its strong, sweet fragrance. It’s the “little darling” that Napoleon brought from Egypt for Josephine.

In early spring and again in late summer, scatter some of the seeds in the garden and in containers. Also add some showier flowers as cover for mignonette’s lackluster white or yellow spikes. The plants grow about a foot tall and, in the Midwest, do best with morning sun and afternoon shade.