

An annual affair



Create a rainbow of colours in your home garden by growing annuals, writes **Elaine Yim**

THE Selangor and Federal Territory Gardening Society recently organised a talk on annual flowers at the YWCA in Kuala Lumpur. The speaker, Dr Yahya Awang, is an associate professor at the Crop Science Department, Faculty of Agriculture, University Putra Malaysia. His expertise is in horticulture of fruit crops and ornamentals.

WHAT ARE ANNUALS?

Annuals are plants that complete their life span in less than a year. They grow rapidly and start flowering early. Lots of flowers are produced and the blooming can last from a few weeks to a few months. When annuals start to set seeds, it is nearing the end of their growth cycle. They will soon die and new plants will grow.

In countries which experience the four seasons, annuals begin to grow in spring, flower in summer

and die by late autumn. In this country, we can grow annuals any time of the year.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ANNUALS

Annuals are grown for their beautiful and colourful flowers. They are commonly used for street displays, stage decorations and seen at flower shows, National Day or Malaysia Day celebrations.

Although growing annuals is labour-intensive and costly, many still grow them. For home gardeners and hobbyists, the personal satisfaction and enjoyment far outweigh the costs.

Tip

- Annuals are short-lived plants so good horticultural practices must start from the beginning to achieve vigorous and balanced vegetative and reproductive growth. Delays in feeding will stress the plants to flower prematurely and complete the life cycle early.
- Petunias are best grown in hanging baskets because in this way they are less prone to diseases caused by high humidity.

Examples of annuals flowers that grow well here are the verbena, marigold, *Celosia plumosa*, *Celosia cristata*, portulaca, dianthus (mini carnation), gomphrena, vinca, zinnia, *Cosmos sulphureus*, sunflowers, melampodium, *Salvia farinacea*, *Salvia splendens* and petunias.

GROWING

CHRYSANTHEMUMS

The flowering of chrysanthemums is affected by the length of the day. We enjoy a year-round day length of more than 12 hours. Chrysanthemums are short day plants which

need at least 12 hours of darkness, therefore, they will not normally flower here. To make them flower, growers use artificial lighting



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to regulate the periods of light exposure.

HOW TO GROW

Annuals can be planted as ground covers and bedding plants or grown in containers in garden walkways and borders. You can grow annuals from seeds or buy them from nurseries and garden centres. Those on promotion and sold in poly bags are quite cheap.

Propagation. Seeds can be germinated in plug trays, flower pots or poly bags. Where possible, try to buy hybrid seeds which are of better quality. Follow the instructions on the packets. Water the soil before you put in the seeds. You can place seeds on top of wet soil and cover them with a sprinkle of loose soil.

Sunlight. Bright shade for seed germination and full sun at flowering stage.

Soil. Fertile fast draining loam such as soil mix of 3:2:1 of topsoil, sand and organic matter. You can also use soilless media such as tropical peat, temperate peat or coco peat with perlite.

Water. Twice a day except on rainy days. Avoid brief watering, watering in the late evenings and late at night. Wet surfaces will promote

growth of fungus. Use manual sprinkler or automatic overhead sprinklers. It is not practical to use drip and furrow irrigation.

Fertiliser. Apply once a fortnight. Fertilisers with complete NPK (Nitrogen, Phosphorus, Potassium) mix or compound are preferred to those that are formulated with only one element. Organic fertilisers do not burn when in excess but be careful not to overdose on the inorganic fertilisers. Imported slow release fertilisers which are coated with resin are more suited for temperate countries.

The nutrients are released by temperature, not by watering. In our climate, such fertilisers will be used up quickly and are only effective for a few weeks. For seed germination, apply fertiliser to the media before planting. Use foliar spray on seedlings. After transplanting, you can apply fertiliser by surface broadcast which is most effective, by spot placement or foliar application.

Pest and diseases. Annuals are prone to grey mould (*Botrytis*), wilt disease, leaf spots and damping off disease which affects germinated seedlings. Pests include aphids, whiteflies, thrips and caterpillars.

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