

## Winter Color for Landscapes

by Jane Morse, University of Florida/IFAS Manatee County Extension Agent

Looking for a way to brighten up a winter landscape? Bedding plants are a great option for adding the color you want. Besides being grown in the landscape they can also be grown in containers to add a splash of color to a porch, deck or patio area.

Decisions about where you are going to place plants must be made before you purchase the plants. What is the light in the planting area? Some plants require full sun, others require moderate light and some require shade. If you live near the beach, plants that are more tolerant of high winds, salt spray and well-water containing high levels of salt need to be chosen. If you have had problems with nematodes in the past, choose plants that are more tolerant of nematodes, or either fumigate or replace the soil in the area to be planted.

When preparing the planting site, spade or till the area at least six inches deep several weeks before planting and add 2-3 inches of organic matter (compost or peat) into the area to increase the nutrient and water holding capacity of the soil. Another option if you have very poor soil or where tree roots limit growth is to place small plants into plastic pots filled with good soil and place the pots (top surface of the pot is at soil level) into the flower beds.

When selecting plants, limit the choice to only a few kinds of plants. Bedding plants are best used as an accent to a landscape, not a main feature. Look for healthy, disease and insect-free plants with dark green foliage. You may think you are getting a bargain buying plants on sale that have been under water stress, are tall and spindly, or have nutrient deficiency symptoms, but this is a bad idea. These plants seldom recover and never reach their full potential. Buy healthy plants when you're ready and plant them within 24 hours for best results.

Water plants before taking them out of the pot or container. If plants have pot-bound root systems, loosen and untangle the root system without breaking the soil ball. Place plants so that the top of the root ball is just at ground level or a little higher. If the stem is placed too low in the ground it will rot and kill the plant. Space the plants based on the mature size of the particular plant. Water immediately after planting and then daily until they have become established. After they are established, check the soil moisture by poking your finger down into the soil about 2 inches. If it is still moist to the touch then you can hold off on watering.

To prevent disease and flower rot, water in the morning and keep the leaves as dry as possible. It is best to water just the soil and root systems. Soaker hoses or micro-irrigation drippers are a great way to water -- just remember to water only ½ inch each time and then turn the system off.

Weeds can be controlled either by mulching, applying pre-emergence herbicides and/or hand weeding. Mulching and hand weeding are the most environmentally friendly.

When mulching apply 2-3 inches of fine textured particles. If using shredded leaves, small leaves (oak leaves) or grass never exceed more than a 2 inch depth. Make sure the mulch does not come in contact with the plant stems (very important). Organic mulches will also improve the soil as they break down.

Some bedding plants that are winter hardy: Alyssum, Calendula, Carnation, Dianthus, Gaillardia, Pansy, Phlox, Rudbeckia, Shasta Daisy, Snapdragon, Verbena.

For a FREE brochure to help you with bedding plant selection including salt tolerance and nematode resistance, as well as planting dates, call the Manatee County Extension Service (941-722-4524), Monday - Friday, from 9 AM to 4 PM and ask to speak to a Master Gardener. The brochure can also be found at this website:  
<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG319>

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Jane Morse  
Environmental Extension Agent,  
Manatee County

1303 17th Street West  
Palmetto, FL 34221  
Phone: 941-722-4524  
Fax: 941-721-6608