

WaterSmart color concepts

Drought and heat tolerant floriculture

by Scott Barnard, Flowerworx



Just as important as your customers' desire for a colorful and impactful flower display is how much light you have to work with and if there is an irrigation/ drip system in place.

Want to design seasonal color beds and containers that will thrive throughout the growing season? First, you must have an understanding of the property's environment.

First things first

Just as important as your customers' desire for a colorful and impactful flower display is how much light you have to work with and if there is an irrigation/ drip system in place. Water, light and location are extremely important in the

success of your seasonal color designs.

Location and placement of annual beds and how you combine your plant choices are also an important aspect in the design process. Design beds and containers by grouping similar light and water needs to give plants the best chance to thrive.

- ▶ An example would be a full-sun bed planted with Serena Angelonia, Lucky Lantana and Cora Vinca that all share the same light and water requirements, whether it is an irrigated bed or hand-watered bed.
- ▶ A shade bed example would be Caladiums, Dragonwing Begonias and Setcreasea.

These examples would provide the best performance because they share similar water and light needs.

An example of a combination that you should avoid is Vinca, Lantana and Petunias in fescue turf zone beds. Based on irrigation run times, the water required to keep the turf alive would overwater the seasonal color. The result would be annuals that would stop blooming or rot due to fungus, and you would soon be replacing them.

When designing beds around warm-season turf areas like Bermuda or Zoysia, a combination of Begonias, Coleus and Profusion Zinnias would perform well together as long as irrigation is set accordingly.

Container combinations

Many containers and pots on your customers' properties are not irrigated and require regular hand watering to survive the spring/summer seasons. It is noteworthy that supplemental hand watering is helpful but not ideal for the plants to thrive.

This bears repeating: it is important when you design your containers that you pair up plant material with similar light and water needs to give them the best chance of success.

Equally important is the preparation of the containers. Use moisture-control potting medium, slow-release fertilizer and incorporate a light application of water retention granules. This process will benefit your containers all season long and give you the results your customers are expecting from their summer display.

Where and when possible, convince your customers to install a drip irrigation system for their containers. This will be more effective and economical in the long run, alleviating the hassle of dragging hoses and saving time in the process.

If your customer wants colorful and impactful containers but they do not have a water source for irrigation, designing with succulents are

a great approach to add color and a point of interest. There are many choices that offer interesting colors and shapes, all that will thrive in sunny containers with almost no water or maintenance. Yucca, Agave and Aloe make stunning thriller accents, while incorporating Sedum, Echeveria and Portulaca make for great fillers and spillers. This design concept offers up dynamic and colorful, drought-tolerant containers that will thrive all season long.

Use water wisely

There is an art to watering and understanding how to manage irrigation is key to the success of your seasonal color displays. Knowing the client's irrigation system and how the zones are set up will directly effect the performance of your seasonal color beds and containers as well as the surrounding landscape.

Overhead watering systems that use rotors and fixed spray heads will distribute more water than a drip system, making it easy to waste and overwater the color beds and landscape. Wind can cause drift and evaporation, resulting in

uneven watering of the soil which can effect the overall performance of the flower beds. Be mindful of irrigation system run times. Cool-season versus warm-season turf areas, shrub and tree varieties and seasonal flower combinations that are incorporated in the landscape will benefit from a properly managed irrigation system. With drip irrigation, water pressure is key and should be set up between 8 psi and 15 psi for maximum performance. If possible, have annual bed and container zones separate from turf and shrub zones.



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Five best bets

If you're looking for heat- and drought-tolerant summer annuals, you can't beat these:



Angelonia



Lantana



Vinca



Zinnia



Verbena

Practice makes perfect

Proper horticultural practices should be used to maximize performance of your seasonal color beds and containers.

- ▶ **Prep the soil.** The ability of the soil to minimize water loss by holding water is extremely important and can be achieved in the preparation process before planting. Most plants will benefit from incorporating compost, which helps the soil retain water and assures proper drainage. Either fit the soil type to your plants or choose plants that fit your soil.
- ▶ **Group plants.** To minimize water waste and guarantee success with your flower designs, group plants with similar light and water requirements. Whether in full sun or shade, there are many varieties of annuals with different heights, colors, textures that will create beauty and appeal throughout the growing season.
- ▶ **Apply mulch.** Organic mulching of annual beds and containers with mini nuggets or a similar product will keep root systems cooler, minimize water evaporation from the soil and help keep weeds at bay.
- ▶ **Water efficiently.** Lastly, having an efficient irrigation system in place for your seasonal color beds and containers will be key to their successful growth. Automatic systems should be set to water in the early morning to minimize waste and help reduce foliar damage from the heat of the day. Having a rain sensor in place to shut the system off when it rains would also be of great benefit for efficient water usage. And, of course, always structure watering plans around any EPA drought rules that may be in effect. 🌿

About the author



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