



ARCHITECTURAL ANNUALS

Plants with proud bearings, majestic profiles, and shapely silhouettes accommodate a variety of landscaping needs—and all in a very short time.

BY RITA PELCZAR



“INSTANT gratification” and “gardening” are words not often used in the same sentence. Gardening, by its very nature, is a process that involves time—often years—to achieve desired effects. Perennials and ground covers need to spread to fill their allotted spaces, and trees and shrubs must gain size to develop their characteristic form and to reconfigure the horizon.

Annuals accelerate the process. Though their effects are not exactly instantaneous, they grow at warp speed compared to most woody plants, allowing gardeners to effect lively changes in the landscape in a very short time. Certain annuals—those big, fast-growing types with bold silhouettes or towering habits—can provide dynamic results in mere weeks. They allow you to fast-forward a design, testing plant sizes and forms for your garden spaces before you go to the expense and effort of a more permanent planting.

Because they are annuals—for our purposes we include both true annuals and tender perennials grown as annuals—the

Color and growth habit are important architectural plant features. Lion's ear (*Leonotis leonurus*), left, produces upright stems bearing whorled tiers of vivid orange flowers. It grows three to six feet tall, with a spread of three feet, providing a stunning accent for a mixed border.

Opposite: Annual sunflowers (*Helianthus annuus*) range in height from one-and-a-half-foot dwarfs to 15-foot giants. The multi-stemmed types, such as 'Autumn Beauty'—shown here with the bright yellow flowers of 'Cutting Gold'—produce abundant summer blooms that double as great cut flowers.



It's hard to beat Texas plume (*Ipomopsis rubra*)—paired above with gloriosa daisies (*Rudbeckia hirta*)—for a tall, striking vertical effect in a border. Its tubular scarlet flowers appear on three- to six-foot stems beginning in midsummer and lasting into fall. A native to southern states from Texas to Florida and South Carolina, it is a biennial or short-lived perennial where winters are mild.

effect is fleeting; a repeat performance will require replanting next year. But the ephemeral nature of annuals has the built-in advantage of great flexibility.

In an architectural sense, large annuals can fulfill many roles. Some create drama as an accent in a mixed bed or alone as a specimen. Others grow quickly to form a dense hedge that screens a view or encloses a space.

Characteristics that should be considered in selecting the best annual for a specific placement and purpose include overall size (both height and spread); form (rounded, angular, erect); color (flowers and foliage) and mass (open or dense).

And, of course, the cultural preferences of a particular plant must fit the site.

You say you're considering putting in a hedge along the back fence but can't quite envision the look from your deck? Try a densely planted, double row of spider flower (*Cleome hassleriana*). You will have a three-to-four-foot hedge in a few weeks, not to mention flowers that will bloom from summer until frost. If the hedge look seems to work, you can plant something more permanent later. Another colorful option for an annual hedge is love-lies-bleeding (*Amaranthus caudatus*), a bushy plant that reaches three to five feet tall and produces drooping, red

tassellike flowers from summer through fall. Or you could try the Mexican sunflower (*Tithonia rotundifolia*) with its dark green leaves that set off the fiery orange flowers to perfection. This dependable performer even grows well in poor soil. Another option is summer cypress (*Bassia scoparia* forma *trichophylla*, formerly *Kochia trichophylla*) which rapidly grows to five feet tall and tolerates shearing. Though its flowers are insignificant, it produces feathery, bright green foliage that turns red in the fall.

If you need a drought-tolerant shrub

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| Botanical/Common Name | Height/Spread (ft.) | Flower or Foliage Effect | USDA/AHS Zones |
|--|---------------------|--|--------------------|
| <i>Abelmoschus moschatus</i> (musk mallow) | 1–5/1 1/2 | large yellow, pink, or red flowers | 11, 12–1 |
| <i>Amaranthus tricolor</i> (Joseph's coat) | 4 1/2/1 1/2 | green, crimson, maroon foliage | 0, 12–1 |
| <i>Centaurea cineraria</i> 'Colchester White' (dusty miller) | 2 1/2/1 | finely divided, white foliage | 7–9, 9–7 |
| <i>Datura metel</i> (angel's trumpet) | 3–5/1 1/2–4 | large white, yellow, or purple flowers open at night | 10–11, 12–7 |
| <i>Graptophyllum pictum</i> (caricature plant) | 3–6/2–3 | variegated leaves, crimson-purple flowers | min. 55°F, 12–1 |
| <i>Lavatera trimestris</i> 'Loveliness' (annual rose mallow) | 3–4/1 1/2 | large rose-pink flowers all summer | 0, 12–1 |
| <i>Papaver somniferum</i> (breadseed poppy) | 3–4/1 | large pink, red, white, or blackish flowers | 0, 7–1 |
| <i>Pennisetum setaceum</i> 'Burgundy Giant' (annual fountain grass) | 5/2 | burgundy leaves and flowers | 9–11, 12–1 |
| <i>Salvia elegans</i> (pineapple sage) | 4–6/3–4 | scarlet flowers, scented foliage | 8–10, 12–1 |
| <i>Silybum marianum</i> (Mary's thistle) | to 5/2–3 | white-veined, glossy green leaves | 6–9, 9–6 |
| <i>Trachelium caeruleum</i> (blue throatwort) | 3–4/1 | violet-blue or white flowers | 9–11, 12–9 |



Left: There's nothing timid about the deep bronze leaves and the bright red flowers of the castor bean (*Ricinus communis* 'Carmencita'). Though drought tolerant, plants achieve maximum size—10 feet tall and three to four feet wide—if grown in rich, well-drained soil and watered regularly.

The two species of flowering tobacco (*Nicotiana* spp.), below, offer options to annual gardeners. The unscented apple-green flowers of *N. langsdorffii* appear on three- to five-foot stems from late spring to early fall and remain open all day long. The large white blooms of *N. sylvestris*, however, are highly fragrant and often close on bright, sunny days. It grows to six feet tall.





Spider flowers (*Cleome hassleriana*) have the accommodating habit of blooming when they are quite young—when plants are only a foot tall—and continuing their floral show until late in the fall when plants top out at four or five feet. As individual flowers fade, they leave long, wispy seed pods behind as new blooms continue to open at the top of each stem. Available in shades of pink, purple, and white, spider flowers are useful in a mixed border or as a summer hedge and are magnets for butterflies and hummingbirds.

for a sunny spot but would rather not wait years for it to achieve its glory, try a Mexican bush sage (*Salvia leucantha*). Though its fuzzy purple flowers don't appear until late summer, they last deep into fall, and the narrow, gray-green foliage offers sufficient interest until the flowers arrive. For a colorful foliage accent, try the shiny-leaved coppertone mallow (*Hibiscus acetosella* 'Red Shield') with its deeply lobed maroon leaves, or the tropical-looking castor bean (*Ricinus communis* 'Carmencita'). Just be aware that the beautiful glossy, beanlike seeds of the latter are highly toxic.

One of the beauties of casting architecturally interesting annuals in various gardening roles is the ease with which you can change your mind. If next year you decide that you really want an open, angular specimen rather than a dense hedge, or a burgundy foliage accent rather than masses of orange flowers, it is easy to accommodate the change with a new annual selection. Check out the chart on page 23 for some other statuesque annuals worth considering. 🍃

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