

Choosing Seeds for a Flower Garden

By Sheri Burke

UCCE / El Dorado County Master Gardener

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When I sow seeds, I start with a handful of different seeds, then make a wish and toss the seeds over my shoulder and hope they all land on my nicely prepared seed trays. Now I wait and see what comes up in a month. How exciting is that? Basically, I sow twice as many seeds that I need, to accommodate the wide margin of error with germination. Sowing seeds, or shall I say “planting” seeds, is about as exciting as watching grass grow; seriously, I’m not kidding. However, this technique has brought forth beautiful plants, which have bloomed in my garden for years, and is a rewarding and cheap exercise. But let’s take a step backward and think about how to choose these seeds.

First, while staring, hyperventilating and drooling over the seed packets on the store wall, a catalog, or website, you may be overwhelmed about which seeds to buy. I say, “Buy them all.” How can I pick just one viola —my favorite— when there are ten different viola colors and a choice of frilly, frizzy or fuzzy petals? Think about what you would like to accomplish in your garden. Do you have a plan? I begin by sowing hundreds of seeds that have an 85% or better germination rate so it would appear that I was successful, which is a correct assumption. After a couple of years, I started adding seeds with only a 50% rate of germination because these plants were generally not found in nurseries. This experiment resulted in 300-400 seedlings all sprouting at the same time, so I started giving plants away. Mind you, I am a nice, generous person, but I slaved, sweated, and babied those little seedlings to puberty, and I wanted to reap the rewards. This is when I started to think about having a PLAN. I now choose my seeds as follows: for my shade garden, I might include a Red Velvet Coleus, a variegated Jacob’s Ladder, Double Circus Orange Impatiens, and a stunning Pin-up Flame Begonia. For a full sun garden, the choices are Bonfire Zinnias, Double Cascade Orchid Petunia, Sacred White Datura, Hello Gorgeous Dahlias, Double White Hollyhock, Green Wizard Rudbeckia, and Purple Volcano Salvia. In the winter my favorite picks are violas such as Brush Strokes, Frosted Chocolate, Johnny Jump Ups, Sorbet, and also a little Peacock Red Kale, and Calendula *Lemonade*. I try not to forget to mix in some vegetables and herbs such as Purple Ruffles basil, Baby eggplants, and a few beets to add interest, texture, and colored foliage. Starting from seed is the cheapest way to experiment with garden design and with hard-to-find plants. The only downside to my plan is that my friends and family no longer receive free plants — well, maybe on occasion. Now I tell them to come to the Master Gardener’s bi-annual plant sale in the spring and fall.

Next, there is a reason why there is writing on the back of the seed packets. This little 3x4 inch of paper is filled with information, particularly, when and how to sow the enclosed seeds. All seeds have a germination cycle, meaning that given the right conditions at the right time, they will sprout. However, if the conditions aren’t to their liking, it can take a couple of weeks longer for germination to occur. How do I know this? I have had my share of throwing out trays of seeds into my “graveyard,” due to lack of germination, and a month later my husband informs me that my plants have come back to life. Just because the seedlings do not emerge from the soil does not mean that the roots haven’t already started which is the first part of the seed to sprout.

When seedlings are ready to be transplanted into the garden, but there is no time for this chore, I set up “holding” containers which can be either wine barrels or left over nursery pots until I figure out where to place the seedlings in my garden. These “holding” containers are like shopping in my very own nursery.

Finally, label the seeds with their name and date of germination and then store the seeds properly. You don't want to end up with 35 tomato plants instead of 35 exquisite and expensive orange cosmos. Tomatoes, anyone? Store the seeds in the packet that they came in, or in glass jars with a teaspoon of dried milk which will help absorb any moisture coming off the seeds, or use the plastic stacked bead containers, or tiny little white paper bags, or even a suitcase. As long as the seeds are stored in a dry, cool, dark place, all is well. However, I have been known to accidentally leave my seed suitcase in the greenhouse on the hottest day of summer, and yet they still manage to germinate!

To learn more on the research-based method of sowing seeds, come to the Master Gardener propagation class to be held on Saturday, March 5, 2011.

This Saturday, January 22, UCCE Master Gardeners will present a class on “Living with Oaks.” The class is held in the Veterans Memorial Building at 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville and starts at 9 AM. The class is offered free of charge. Come learn about maintaining and protecting these wonderful trees.

The days are getting longer now and it won't be long before it's time to put in a spring vegetable garden or spruce up the landscaping with a few new plants. Plan to attend the Master Gardener 2nd Annual Spring Plant Sale to be held on Saturday, April 16th in the parking lot of the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville. The sale benefits Master Gardener community outreach programs. Come check out the great selection of plants and garden art. Plan to stay for a demonstration on a popular gardening topic or bring your garden hand tools to be sharpened by one of our Master Gardeners.

The Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. Walk-ins are welcome. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Gardener/.