

## For Success, Start with Flower Plants of High Quality



*Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Impatiens.jpg "Successful flower plantings start with healthy plants and good planting techniques."*

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**G**ardeners are natural nurturers. There exists among us an urge to help ailing plants to recover and flourish. In most cases however, if we start with low quality, sickly plants, they will never reach their full potential regardless of the amount of care provided. This concept is especially true and can be applied when purchasing flower plants such as petunias or snapdragons.

The peak of the spring bedding plant season is upon us. Nurseries and garden centers are offering a wide selection of started plants for transplanting to prepared landscape beds. These plants can be purchased in compartmentalized plastic flats known as cell packs, or in larger containers such as four inch pots.

Bedding plants grown in four inch pots are usually more expensive, but are larger and will produce more flowers sooner than plants that were grown in cell packs. As a result, beds established with these larger plants are attractive sooner and for a longer period of the growing season. Another advantage of using plants grown in four inch pots is that they will cover the bed sooner and help to control weeds.

Look for young, healthy and pest free plants with dark green foliage. Avoid purchasing plants that are tall and spindly, showing nutrient deficiencies or having fungal leaf spots. Extra large bedding plants that have been held for too long in their containers are certainly not a bargain, as they will never reach their full potential.

Seasonal adaptation should be considered when purchasing bedding plants. We're in a transition period between the cool and warm season now. It's too late to plant winter bloomers like pansies. It would have been best to plant early spring flowers such as dianthus, petunias, and snapdragons in the fall. You can still plant them now if you plant large plants which will come into flower quickly . They will still flower into May, longer for the petunias. If you think we're past our last freeze, you can start planting impatiens, marigolds, salvia, pentas, and other warm-season flowers now.

## For Success

Sites where bedding plants are to be established should be spaded or tilled at least six inches deep, well before planting. Sandy soils generally have very low nutrient and water holding capacities. The incorporation of a two to three inch layer of organic material such as peat, compost, or manure will increase a sandy soil's ability to hold moisture and nutrients.

Space plants according to the adult size for each species. Extremely close spacing results in wasted plants, crowding and reduced flowering, while spacing too far apart reduces the desired mass effect. Most bedding plants can be spaced twelve to eighteen inches apart.

Once purchased, bedding plants should be planted without delay – within twenty four hours, if possible. When left in the containers for too long without the constant care they receive at the nursery, they become stressed, change physiologically and rarely recover completely.

Set out plants at such a depth that the top of each root ball is even with, or slightly above the level of the surrounding soil. Avoid excessively deep planting as this can result in rotted stems and roots.

Once a bed is planted, water thoroughly using a hose with a breaker (diffuser) attached. This initial watering is important to settle and place the soil in good contact with the root systems.

Mulch bed surfaces to a depth of two to three inches, using coarse bark or pine needles. Mulching materials should not come in contact with the base of plant stems. The high moisture environment created by mulch piled against plant stems increases the chances of stem rot and death.

Maintaining a stable nutrient level in the soil is one of the keys to season long flowering. This can be accomplished by making light monthly applications of complete granular or liquid fertilizers.

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