

## Choose Melampodium for Low Maintenance Summer Color



Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Melampodium is one of the most reliable summer annuals.

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**O**ne spring my class of sixth graders got tired of looking at an empty planter that was just outside the classroom door. It had for several semesters been a handy place to toss chewing gum wrappers or unfinished bits of candy or other forbidden items before entering the classroom. Together we determined to do something about that unsightly state of affairs. What we needed, we decided, was some brightly colored flowers that would perk up the scene. It was in full sun most of the day and surrounded by brick and concrete. I cast about for some annuals that would tolerate these conditions.

A visit to the neighborhood nursery brought melampodium to my attention. Bright yellow daisylike flowers about the size of a nickel literally covered the plants in the tray. “Those,” I thought to myself, “would look great in the brick planter.” I bought the tray of plants and took them to school the next day.

The children and I cleaned out the planter and added some new soil. Then we planted the melampodiums about a foot apart down the length of the planter. We added some slow-release fertilizer and watered the plants in thoroughly. After snuggling some pine needle mulch around the tiny plants, we returned to the arduous task of learning about possessive nouns.

Obviously I made a good choice. All spring the plants grew until no space remained in the planter. They became a solid mass. Both the children and I were pleased with their performance. When summer vacation time rolled around, we left the flowers to fend for themselves. Quite truthfully, that is what they had been doing all along. Luckily the planter was equipped with an automatic watering system which was turned on infrequently.

Though the sixth graders progressed to the seventh grade and had no reason to venture back into the sixth

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grade territory the following fall, many of them came to check on the welfare of their flowers. They found them in great shape, still blooming to beat the band.

Winter, of course, killed them. However, when spring came the following year, we did not have to purchase any more plants. Hundreds of tiny seedlings sprang up in the planter. Many of them were pulled and sent home with the children to plant in flower beds at home.

Since that time, melampodium has been one of my most reliable summer annuals. Several varieties are available, such as the compact 'Million Gold', 'Lemon Delight', and 'Derby' which top out at about ten inches. 'Showstar' and 'Medallion' are taller varieties that reach 24 to 36 inches tall.

One of the perks of growing these tough little plants is that diseases and insects seem to have no interest in them. They are self cleaning, so deadheading is not needed. Since they are self branching, they need no pinching to encourage bushiness. Furthermore, they take the South's heat and humidity in stride and miss nary a beat. They are truly low-maintenance plants.

Melampodium combines beautifully with many other plants in the garden. I particularly enjoy growing it in combination with some of the dark leafed coleuses or with 'Blackie' ornamental potato or dark leafed ornamental grasses. It is striking when combined with the recently introduced ornamental millet 'Purple Majesty'. Pairing it with blue and purple flowers such as annual ageratum (*Ageratum houstonianum*) or spiky blue salvia brings out the best in both colors. Try it with colorful ornamental peppers or with red zinnias or salvias. Like I said, it's a great mixer in the garden.

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