



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

Planting for impact

“I want my garden to look like this!”

Hands me phone with a picture of the main garden area at Butchart Gardens in Victoria, British Columbia.

Hey, I’ve been there! I was about ten years old and I still remember the beds of gaudy annuals, the twinkle lights in the evening, and the amazing fountain and light show. Definitely worth a visit, especially with kids, and they are justifiably famous for the spectacular beds of flowering annuals.

Ok, I see from their website that you’ll need 50 full-time gardeners, 20 part-time gardeners, and 26 greenhouses. But maybe we can scale this down for you.

Annuals or perennials?

Public gardens get great impact from mass plantings of annuals, which are plants that grow, bloom, and die all in one season. Things like petunias, marigolds, and impatiens. The gardeners also refresh the beds frequently. Landscape firms that maintain high-quality flower plantings typically change them over about four to six times per year.

Sometimes they do use perennials (plants that bloom year after year). I had the opportunity to tour Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania and go behind the scenes during their annual fall chrysanthemum festival. If you wonder how they keep it all looking so perfect, the answer is that minions go out at dawn before the gates open and pull the plants with fading flowers, replacing them with fresh plants from the production greenhouses. Each planter, looking like one big plant, is often a collection of individually grown stems, each with a perfect flower, with the plants then crowded together to create visual impact.

Or the whole planter is replaced overnight. I took pictures of huge circular planters of mums suspended from the ceiling of the main greenhouse, each with hundreds of blooms. When I reviewed my pictures later, I realized that one day they were white and another they were yellow!

Annuals are great for avid gardeners. But plant breeders have observed that you are short on time and seem to want flowering plants that give lots of bloom over a very long period with little effort. Here are some new introductions that give high impact with low care. Resist the temptation to mix things up. Those public gardens fill a whole bed with just one or two species to get great swaths of color.

These varieties are either hybrids or selections. Hybrids are created by crossing different species or existing varieties in a controlled manner to try to get specific characteristics. Selections are simply naturally occurring variations that are observed and, if they are different and consistent enough, are named and propagated from divisions or cuttings for market.

Winter and spring

1. *Gazania* ‘New Day’.



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I am very impressed by these new seedling strains which bloom from October into summer. Nine months of bloom! The colors are dramatic and often enhanced by stripes on the petals. This seed variety is one of the clumping types, not trailing, so each plant gets about a foot across. I have seen plantings of gazania against hot walls with reflected heat continue for over a decade. Frost hardy with reliable mid-winter bloom, and drought tolerant.

How to use them: plant them about a foot apart in full sun. You can water as little as every couple of weeks in summer.

Spring into summer

1. *Alstroemeria* hybrids.

Peruvian lily blooms start in May and the last blooms hold into August. The plants spread by rhizomes rather steadily, until you suddenly notice they've kind of taken over a whole bed. I can think of worse problems. The color range has expanded from shades of pink to include red, bright yellow, and purple.

How to use them: with some care to avoid crowding other plants. The plants are more compact in full sun, though I have plants in nearly every sun and shade exposure. If you're limited for space or want tidier plants, look for the Inca series or other dwarf types.

2. *Buddleia* x 'CranRazz'

One of the best of the dozens of new butterfly bush varieties introduced in the last few years. The name describes the color: it's very intense pink. The fragrance is honey-sweet and powerful, especially in the evening. The plant begins blooming in April and continues through the fall. Prune it if you like. If you don't, it gets about 6' by the end of the second year.

Although varieties of *Buddleia davidii* have become invasive in England, New Zealand, and the Pacific Northwest of the U.S., the original forms can reseed but are not considered invasive in California. Newer cultivars of the species have been selected that have much lower seed viability, and hybrids between *B. davidii* and other species are, in many cases, entirely sterile; i.e., produce no viable seed or no seed at all. States that had listed *Buddleia* as invasive are allowing the sale of these, such as the Flutterby series (which are also lower-growing and more compact). Note that growers are calling these "nectar bush" instead of butterfly bush. CranRazz appears to set no seed at all.

How to use it: this is a big dramatic plant with loads of blooms. Make it a centerpiece, or plant several as an informal hedge.

3. *Agapanthus* hybrids

Everyone knows Lily of the Nile, since it's one of the most ubiquitous landscape plants in California. New forms have extended the color range and bloom season.

- 'Lapis' grows to one foot and has bright blue flowers over a long period. Most *Agapanthus* bloom once in about May. This one keeps initiating flower spikes all through the summer.



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- ‘Queen Mum’ has enormous flower heads about three feet high and the individual blossoms are white with blue throats. It’s one of the loveliest varieties yet. The flowers open and hold for many weeks.

How to use it: plant these two together, with the Queen Mum surrounded by Lapis, for a cool, elegant two-tone pattern of blue and white. Agapanthus are drought tolerant. Full sun is best.

Summer into fall

4. *Gaura* ‘Belleza Dark Pink’

Gaura, the roadside wildflower from Texas and Louisiana, has come a long way. First of all, the name has been changed; taxonomists now place it in *Oenothera* with the evening primroses. *Gaura* becomes a common name, but it is the likeliest way you’ll find it labeled in nurseries. The Belleza series is denser and less wispy than the original form. How to use it: be aware that it gets bigger than advertised. 18 inches tall, says the label? Mine got to 4 feet tall and wide. Be forewarned: it also reseeds, and the seedlings are variable in height and color. The reddish foliage and wands of red flowers look great with grey-green foliage such as lavenders or rockroses. *Gaura* is a tough, heat-loving, drought tolerant plant for full sun.

5. *Plumbago capensis* ‘Imperial Blue’

Cape plumbago has pale blue flowers and sprawls or scrambles over nearby plants. This variety has darker blue flowers. Frost-sensitive but root-hardy; the top is usually killed back some in winter, but just cut it back as it recovers in spring. Blooms begin late spring and continue through fall. *Plumbago* can take some shade.

How to use it: clear, light blue flowers and light green foliage complement almost any nearby shrub. Plants four feet apart grow together by summer’s end. Planted near a fence, it scrambles up it like a vine without needing support.

6. *Perovskia* ‘Little Spire’

This shorter version of Russian sage is half-size, to two feet tall, with clouds of tiny light purple flowers all summer and fall. Bees and butterflies love them. Sun-loving and drought tolerant. Mass them behind tighter-growing, lower plants such as the *Delosperma*, below.

7. *Verbena* hybrids

Whenever it’s hot, *verbena* is blooming. Mildew resistance and low growth habit are the key benefits of newer varieties. The colors are hot and they bloom until late fall. For very low growth, use the Tapiens series. Taller, more mildew resistant types include the EnduraScape and Superbenas. Most frost back in winter, so they look best if you cut or mow them in spring.

Pretty much always in flower except mid-winter, and even then sometimes.



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8. *Lantana montevidensis* (old name *L. sellowiana*).

Breeders have really gone to town with Lantanas in recent years. New varieties have hotter colors and tighter growth habits. But most are new varieties of *Lantana x camara*, which is more frost tender and looks unattractive in winter.

L. montevidensis has lavender flowers, is a trailing, ground-covering type, and is definitely more cold-hardy. A white variation showed up many years ago. New in 2018, we have shades of lavender: a strong purple one called 'Lord Brooks', and a silvery-pink variety called 'Lady Brooks'. The grower describes 'Lord Brooks' as "about twice as dark as the regular form."

How to use them: Plant three feet apart in full sun or light shade. Very effective on a mound or trailing over a wall. Blooms nearly year-round, starting in early spring and continuing almost through winter. Nearly indestructible, it tolerates heat, even reflected afternoon sun, and drought.

9. Flower Carpet® and Drift® roses

Mass-flowering ground cover roses are in a class by themselves for the color impact they provide with virtually no care. You don't have to prune them, they resist diseases, and clusters of blooms keep coming for months. Of the whole series, I think the Flower Carpet White is one of the best, growing just about 18 inches tall and 3 feet wide, and blooming non-stop.

How to use them: plant three feet apart as a low hedge to edge the border. Great barrier where you want to stop foot traffic.

10. *Delosperma* 'John Proffitt'

The hardy ice plants are finally catching on as lawn replacements in Northern California. They look lush but tolerate considerable drought. This very flat grower has shiny green leaves and neon pink blooms over a much longer season than most other varieties.

Note: thanks to Debbie Davis for her editorial guidance over her many years at the helm of the Davis Enterprise, and best wishes to Debbie and to Bruce Gallaudet as they head off to retirement. Maybe you'll finally have time to plant a garden!



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CranRazz is a hybrid butterfly bush that has an upright growth habit. It produces great wands of fragrant, hot red-pink flowers from spring through fall. Unlike earlier Buddleias, it does not reseed.



Imperial Blue is an improved, darker blue variety of the long-popular cape plumbago. The plant sprawls or climbs up onto nearby shrubs and fences. Cut it back after a hard winter freeze.



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Lily of the Nile has been planted in California for decades, providing one burst of flowers over several weeks in early summer. This new form has darker, more vivid blue flowers and continues to put out new flower spikes all summer. Photo courtesy of Keith Miner, Monterey Bay Nursery



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Queen Mum variety of Lily of the Nile is one of the showiest new varieties. Huge flower clusters have dozens of individual flowers, each white blossom with a dark blue throat. This one makes a great focal point of color for several weeks from May into July.



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The first Alstroemerias we planted decades ago had sprawling stems on plants that spread vigorously, a little rambunctious but providing many weeks of great cut flowers. New compact-growing Peruvian lilies are better choices for gardeners with limited space. The bloom begins in late spring and the flowers hold into August. Indian Summer blooms about two feet high.