



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

Flowers with purpose

“I want to plant a bunch of flowers, cheap. Whaddya got?”

Or, as another person put it: “what’s the most economical way to get a good supply of flowers for cutting? I want to have flowers all the time.”

Despite significant increases in the price of seed over several years now, planting from seed remains the most economical way to grow a garden – if you happen to be good at it. This is a good time to start seeds for summer flowers.

Growing seedlings indoors isn’t the easiest thing to do, but here are the key elements:

- Use a fast-draining mix of peat or coir with perlite or vermiculite. No garden soil or compost.
- Place the seed pots in the brightest natural light in your house. A window facing south is ideal. If you use grow lights, they need to be close to the plants.
- Water gently. A small spray bottle is effective. Don’t let them dry out.
- As soon as they sprout, move them outside during day and back in at night.
- Once they have a set of true leaves (the leaves that form second, after the cotyledon leaves), transplant them to larger pots. For this next stage, any good potting soil will do. They will likely need water daily. They can be left outside on warmer nights without harm.

Why move them in and out? Air movement causes plants to vibrate and release an internal hormone (ethylene) that thickens the stem. Natural sunlight is better for plant growth than indoor light. But when the night temperatures are below about 45 it can injure the seedlings, so that daily shuttle in and out, hassle that it may be, is the key to getting sturdy seedlings.

You may find it easier to just buy seedlings. So perhaps a better way to look at value is in terms of what you get from a plant.

Sunflowers and zinnias

From that perspective, you really can’t beat sunflowers and zinnias in the summer here, whether you start with seeds or transplants that you purchase. They produce flowers quickly and abundantly in hot weather, and they grow together just fine, with lots of varieties in all sorts of colors and sizes.

Sunflowers and zinnias are American species. Zinnias come from dry grasslands of the southwest, especially Mexico. They love dry heat. Sunflowers were domesticated in Mexico and the southeastern U.S. about 5,000 years ago.

What you need:

Full sun, a couple of feet of space per plant, a simple way to water.

Soil enriched with manure, compost, or fertilizer will grow bigger plants.



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Both are fast-growing plants when young, like plenty of water in the early growth stages and can take more drought as the season goes along.

A key difference is that most sunflowers are one and done: they grow quickly, flower spectacularly, make seed, and die. For a succession of flowers, you plant new seedlings every couple of weeks.

Zinnias are just getting going with that first big bloom, branching, and continuing to flower well into the fall. You only need to plant one batch to get flowers all season.

Sunflowers can be planted anytime in spring or early summer. Zinnias need very warm soil, shouldn't be planted out until May, and can be planted into July.

Both are very vulnerable to snails and slugs, earwigs, and birds in the early seedling stage, and meadow mice, tree rats, and squirrels like to eat the seeds. If you plant the seed directly into the ground, protect them from birds and mammals with an inverted strawberry basket until they have their second set of leaves. The other pests feed at night, so if you see damage a quick inspection after dark with a flashlight will reveal the culprits.

Seedlings that you transplant are mostly vulnerable for the first few nights after planting. I recommend midnight flashlight patrols.

Which kinds are best for cutting?

State Fair zinnias are very impressive. Benary Giant zinnias are awesome. My last Benary Giant was still flowering in December and was about six feet tall. Each flower lasts a long time, opening more fully over a couple of weeks, while the plant branches around it with more flower buds.

Zinnias are very attractive to butterflies and hummingbirds. There are dwarf types of zinnias that make great garden flowers, though their stems are too short for cutting. Plant these at the sunny edge of your vegetable garden to draw pollinators and other beneficial insects.

With sunflowers you have choices from one-foot dwarf types to varieties that grow more than ten feet tall (Guinness World Records tells us that the tallest sunflower was over 30 feet tall, grown in Germany in 2014).

For fun and for seeds, you may wish to grow, at least once in your life, the 1880's variety usually sold as Russian Mammoth which easily grows to 12 to 15 feet and can produce heads up to two feet across. But that's not exactly a cut flower.

Breeders have come up with many new types that grow quickly to 3 to 4 feet, each plant producing a single long-stemmed bloom. Some branch and make multiple flowers. Some are pollenless, which is an advantage in flower arrangements. Colors range from the familiar bright yellow to orange, red, red-black, bicolor striped, white, and more.

You can plant these among the zinnias, then just cut each sunflower to the ground as it finishes its bloom and allow the zinnias to fill in the spaces.

As you've probably noticed, a lot of sunflowers are grown around here, hybrids being produced for seed to be grown elsewhere. Yolo and Solano counties are a hub of sunflower breeding.



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Sunflowerselections.com is a breeder in Woodland that has introduced dozens of sunflower varieties, including many especially for cut flowers. They sell seed to the public.

What else is good for cutting?

I like to peruse the back of seed catalogues to find some of those older types of flowers that were grown more widely in the past, and other oddities.

I was surprised to find one vendor selling seed of Spring madia (*Madia elegans*), a wildflower native to the western U.S. and Baja California. Calscape.org, the incredibly useful native plant resource of the California Native Plant Society, informs us that *Madia elegans* “tends to grow in open, grassy places.” Well, that’s our natural plant community here.

The foliage exudes “a pleasantly aromatic oil which led to the common name Tarweed.” More notable are the very sweetly scented flowers, and the curious fact that they curl up their petals during the daytime. *Madia* bloomed for me through mid-summer and appears to have re-seeded happily. The flowers are extremely attractive to beneficial insects such as syrphid flies (their larvae eat aphids), and several types of bees.

Scabiosa (pincushion flower) is a plant that comes in annual and perennial forms. The most common perennial scabiosas, which are Mediterranean in origin, come in pink and blue. They have the benefits of tight growth habit and a very long bloom season. It’s simplest to buy starts of these. They bloom nearly all year.

The annual scabiosa are taller, somewhat sprawling, bloom very freely all summer in a wider range of colors and are quite easy from seed. In fact, they’ll self-sow in your garden.

Honeybees, butterflies and hummingbirds love scabiosas.

Benefits of flowers

We may be planting for own pleasure, but it’s worth noting the tangential benefits of planting flowers for each season.

Thanks to media coverage of declining bee populations, there’s been strong interest in flowers to encourage pollinators. Native bees and European honeybees visit sunflowers, zinnias, and other daisies such as the madia, as well as scabiosa.

Providing a long season of bloom helps to draw beneficial insects into the garden: ladybird beetles, leatherwing beetles, lacewings, and more.

Everyone, it seems, wants to feed butterflies and caterpillars, and it’s always fun to attract hummingbirds. Butterflies and hummingbirds are very attracted to these flowers.

Low-care perennials for cutting

For simpler gardening, plant perennial flowers that bloom year after year, choosing types that are good for cutting. A few notable garden perennials that make good cut flowers include:

Friendship sage (*Salvia ‘Amistad’*). This robust ornamental sage grows quickly to four to five feet tall and wide, producing long wands of blue-purple flowers all summer and fall. Like



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nearly all salvias, the flowers are very attractive to hummingbirds and the large *Xylocopa* bees. It's a hybrid that originated in Argentina.

Peruvian lily (*Alstroemeria*). The old-fashioned types make some of the best long-lasting cut flowers. The plants can grow in sun or a fair bit of shade, like plenty of water but tolerate drought. They spread very steadily; don't say I didn't warn you! *Alstroemeria* bloom from spring to about July.

Nurseries like to sell very dwarf types, which are great garden plants, but the stems aren't long enough for cutting. Better to look for plants of the many new hybrids that grow to 2 to 3 feet tall. Wear gloves: the foliage of Peruvian lily can cause skin irritation.

Lavender (*Lavandula*). These Mediterranean shrubs are very well-adapted here, especially if given gradually decreasing frequency of watering as they establish in the landscape. They are very drought tolerant. English lavenders and lavandins are the best ones for fragrance, but Spanish lavenders bloom as early as winter. Very attractive to many types of bees.

Pinks (*Dianthus*). Carnations are the best-known species in *Dianthus*, but they're kind of floppy to grow. Other pinks have sturdier stems and also have flowers with varying levels of that familiar spicy, clove scent. *Dianthus* bloom most heavily in late spring.

Flowering plants are an integral and crucial part of a healthy garden ecosystem, providing food via nectar and pollen and helping to encourage the presence of insects and birds that provide natural pest control, pollinate our food crops, and improve our own health and well-being.

That may be asking for a lot from any one flower! The key is abundance, succession, diversity, and habitat. Succession means planning for plants that bloom in each season.

The more diverse and abundant the blooms in your yard, over the longest possible season, the more diverse and abundant will be the species of wildlife attracted.



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Pictures and captions:





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An aging zinnia flower: this one is about two weeks old! The Benary Giant zinnias give more bang for the buck than almost anything else you can grow from seed. They provide great long stems for cutting, strong colors, and a very long season of bloom with reasonable drought tolerance.



Sunflowers are very easy to grow and make great planting projects for kids. You can grow types specially bred for cut flowers, grow varieties selected for seed, or try some of the miniature ones in pots if you're limited for space.



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There are perennial and annual scabiosas (pincushion flowers). The perennial types (shown here) bloom spring through fall and come in blue and pink. Annual scabiosas have longer stems and come in a wider range of colors.



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Madia elegans, aka Tarweed, is a native wildflower that loves full sun.



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The petals curl during the day, then open out flat at night. The flowers have a sweet, honey-like fragrance, especially in the evening.



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English lavender with native digger bees, settled in for the evening. The male bees hang out on flowers overnight. The females dig into open soil areas nearby.



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The Friendship sage, *Salvia Amistad*, is a hybrid of *Salvia guaranitica* (anise-scented sage, referring to the fragrance of the foliage). It is vigorous and blooms from spring through fall, with flower spikes long enough for cutting. Very attractive to hummingbirds and the large *Xylocopa* bees. This is a big plant, easily getting 5 feet by 5 feet.