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Plan Before You Purchase and Before You Plant

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GARDEN NOTES

PLAN BEFORE YOU PURCHASE AND BEFORE YOU PLANT

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Color is slowly creeping back into our landscapes. Bulbs and a few shrubs are beginning to blossom, and soon the spring perennials will be blooming. Before long we will be rushing to the nurseries and garden centers to pick out annuals of every hue and color to fill empty spaces invading our landscapes.

“Before you descend upon the nurseries waving your credit card, make a plan for what to plant in those vacant spaces,” says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist.

“Making a plan may seem compulsive,” he says. “However, designing the flower bed before ever looking at a flower or entering a garden center ensures that the flowers will fit the design, instead of the other way around.”

First thing to do is measure the flower beds, Goodspeed advises. Then, using graph paper draw the beds to scale. Typically, make one square on the paper equal one square foot. Make drawings as accurate as possible to the actual shape of the beds; and then make several copies.

Next, use colored pencils or crayons to start the design, he says. Draw in borders and group plantings, indicating desired colors and mixes. Play around and have fun with the design. Do not think about what type of flowers, just use the colors and pretend any color is available. If you don't like the design, you can always grab another copy and start again.

“You do not have to be an artist to design a beautiful flower bed,” Goodspeed says. “Any color will look better than brown. Certain colors will give different effects. Warm colors such as red, yellow and orange, bring a sunny feeling to a cool shady area. Cooler colors such as blue, green and violet bring a soothing coolness to a hot patio or walkway.”

Complementary colors provide eye-catching, dramatic plantings, he says. Complementary colors are opposite each other on the color wheel. These might include planting blues with oranges, purples with yellows, or reds with greens.

“Some of my favorite designs include complementary plantings. Purple nierembergia is wonderful planted with the deep yellow Dahlberg daisies,” he says.

Harmonious colors are next to each other on the color wheel, Goodspeed explains.

Examples would be combinations of red with purple or orange, blue with purple or green, yellow with green or orange, or orange with yellow or red. These plantings are not as vivid but have a more softening effect. This is why red geraniums look at home surrounded by violet and pink lobelia or alyssum.

Monochromatic plantings can also be quite attractive, he says. These color schemes use different flowers in a single color throughout a flower bed. For example, an all-pink garden might use pink geraniums, petunias, verbena and vinca. The different hues and forms add interest and appeal.

“After determining the colors needed to fill the design, calculate the amount of flowers by counting the number of squares on the graph paper in any color,” Goodspeed says. “Most annuals are planted on about one-foot centers. I prefer them closer together, so they fill in quickly and look full the whole summer.”

He says the last step is going to the nursery to buy the flowers in the desired colors, taking them home and incorporating them into the beds. Try different annuals from year to year. Try to stay away from the predictable petunias and marigolds as often as possible. There are many other beautiful annuals with fewer problems and that are in less demand during the spring planting rush.

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