

Many homeowners perform the majority of their annual gardening in springtime only, often forgetting or ignoring the winter as one of the best times to add seasonal plants to the landscape or container gardens. By adding cool-season annuals to your landscape in winter, you will enhance the quality your garden, increase curb appeal, and add color and dimension to a possibly otherwise barren landscape. If you haven't planted your cool-season annuals yet, don't fret. You still have time. Some of the most common cool-season annuals that can be planted in January include dianthus, ornamental cabbage and kale, snapdragons and viola. As we move closer to spring, local garden centers will begin to carry alyssum, bacopa, annual phlox, calendula, forget-me-nots and nasturtiums.

To prepare your planting area, first you must remove existing mulch from the garden area. You can either reapply old mulch along with new fresh mulch on top of the old in the garden or compost the old material. You will also need to remove weeds from the area and discard in the trash. Don't compost weeds, as this will help to ensure that you will have weed-seed-free compost. Next add 1 to 2 inches of a high-quality organic-based garden soil. For the best results, incorporate the garden soil into the planting area so long as there are no roots of other trees and shrub obstructing your work area. This can be done with a trowel or a hand cultivator.

To help your cool-season annual thrive long into spring, be sure to add a fertilizer. If a granulated fertilizer is added, use 8-8-8 or 15-5-10. This will be enough to feed your cool-season bedding plants for up to eight weeks. If you choose to use a slow-release fertilizer, this will typically last well into spring.

After preparing your garden bed, plant your cool-season annuals at the recommended spacing. This information can typically be found on the tag that came with the plant. After planting, be sure to add a thick layer of mulch – 2 to 3 inches will be enough to help suppress weeds and conserve soil moisture and warmth.

Though insect pests are at a minimum this time of year, they are not absent. The possibility exists of seeing pests such as aphids in the garden. Continue to be on the lookout, scouting plants and under leaves. If aphids are encountered, feel free to spray with insecticidal soap, horticultural oil or Malathion. When using pesticides in the landscape, be sure to always follow the label directions.

Check with your local nurseries for availability and help selecting plant material, or contact your local Extension office. Planting your cool-season annuals now will ensure your garden beds will be full of color in March and April.