

Ask a Master Gardener

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by Shelly Murphy, Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer

Flowering Annuals for Shade

Q. I have mostly a shady yard but I love flowering annuals. Is there anything I can plant besides common begonias and impatiens for some color?

A. One of my favorite bloomers for long-season color in part shade is *Torenia fournieri*, commonly known as Wishbone Flower. A native of Asia, this carefree summer annual will bloom non-stop summer through fall in all zones in shade. It will also tolerate morning sun here, although it prefers humidity and moist soil in shade and needs regular water during hot weather.

The flowers resemble snapdragons and are shaped like flared trumpets. The stamens are arranged in a wishbone shape, which is probably how it got its common name.

Torenia comes in several varieties. The 'Clown' variety comes in various shades of blue, purple, magenta, pink and white, as well as mixed colors. 'Panda' has blue or pink flowers on plants 8 to 10 inches tall. 'Compacta blue' has blue flowers with violet and yellow throats. 'Susie Wong' is intense yellow with a deep purplish-red, nearly black throat.

The plant comes in a trailing variety with slightly larger blooms, like the one pictured here, which looks best in pots or hanging baskets. Sadly, I have not found trailing *torenia* locally for several years. I used to plant one 4-inch plant in a large basket, using moisture-control potting soil with time-released fertilizer. I hung it in a dogwood tree where it soon filled the basket. I watered it a couple of times per week since, if the plant dries out, the flowers will begin to look tired and faded. It can be deadheaded regularly, although it isn't necessary. If the stems get long and leggy, they can be pinched back to promote new growth.

I used to find upright or bushy *torenia* in six-packs. Now it is primarily available in single 4-inch pots or larger and sold as a "premium" annual, with a heftier price to match.

Torenia can also be grown from seed, although they may have to be ordered online or from a catalog. Seeds can be sown directly in the ground or in pots and window boxes after the danger of frost has passed and the soil has warmed up (typically after April 15 in our Zone 7b.) *Torenia* looks especially good in mass plantings in a border. They often reseed in my yard from year to year. If they don't come up in the right spot, I find they are easy to move.

Prior to the first freeze, *torenia* can be lifted and brought inside for winter bloom indoors. Sometimes I cut them back and let them go semi-dormant near a window in my basement. Come spring, I give them some liquid fertilizer and gradually expose them to sun as new growth appears.

Another "premium" annual I like to use in pots and hanging baskets is Dragon's Wing Begonia. They come in red, pink and white and bloom from spring until fall. They do well in shade, but will also tolerate several hours of sun. Three plants in 4-inch pots will fill a large pot or hanging basket within a

few weeks. I am especially fond of the huge pot on my deck pictured here which is planted with three of these along with a variegated hosta, a tiarella, and needlepoint ivy. I water the pot about once a week and occasionally provide some liquid fertilizer. These begonia plants can also be cut back before frost and over-wintered indoors. Or cuttings can be taken and rooted in water or hormone powder and planted in pots next spring.

Some gardeners are crazy about sun and shade varieties of New Guinea Impatiens, which can also have interesting and colorful foliage. Last spring they looked so good in the nursery that I opted to give them another try and planted them on my porches. But mine have proven as frustrating as obstinate children. The shade variety I planted in hanging baskets on my screened porch have had few blooms. The sun variety I put in pots on my front porch have blooms, but without daily watering, look wilted as wet Kleenex. Next year I'm switching back to Dragon's Wing Begonias.

Don't rule out using foliage plants in your shade garden which provide texture and interest as well as color. These include ferns, hostas, tiarellas, huecheras, and colorful caladiums and coleus that will look great and contrast well with your flowering annuals.

Now is a good time to cut back any other leggy, tired-looking annuals in your beds, pots and hanging baskets. Give them a drink of liquid fertilizer. With regular care, they should reward you with a profusion of blooms from now until frost.

For answers to any gardening questions, contact a Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.