

Ask a Master Gardener
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Phyllis King, Master Gardener Extension Volunteer

Summer Slump

Q. My garden has hit a real summer slump; what are some tips to bring in some color and energy without spending a great deal of money and time?

A. As spring and early summer flowers fade, Walter Reeves in his book, *Gardening in Georgia*, suggests that they should be pulled and replaced with colorful summer annuals like petunias, marigolds, coleus, or geraniums. As August begins, it is a perfect time to walk your garden early in the morning and make entries in your journal about which plants are flourishing and which ones need replacing.

Sometimes a great deal of color and interest can be generated by filling in with a few six packs of annuals. When shopping, choose wisely. A six-pack that is covered in blooms will look pretty for a short time, but those blooms will soon fade and new ones will not put out for weeks. A wiser choice is to choose plants with a couple of blooms and many unopened buds. Additionally, smart planting will give those buds the best opportunity to bring the color that you are wanting.

Dr. Gary Wade, Extension Horticulturist, uses an economical method of planting. He suggests that the first step is to thoroughly till your soil to a depth of 6 inches; then use newspapers separated into a stack of sheets. You will also need a 5 gallon bucket of water to soak briefly three sheets at a time in the water and then spread them in a single stack on the tilled soil. Continue until the entire bed is covered with newspaper. Cover with a one inch pine bark mini-nugget layer; use a sharp trowel to make a hole for your plants and backfill. This method should help you to save time and money by combating weeds, conserving water, and repurposing old newspapers.

To keep the color bright and beautiful in your garden, use a slow-release fertilizer at planting time; one advantage is that you do not have to remember to schedule regular feedings throughout the summer. However, if you prefer to use a granular fertilizer, a water soluble type, or a commercial organic type follow the directions carefully. Set up reminders to keep the follow-up applications on track and look for helpful tools to make the task more convenient. Most garden centers sell spreaders for granular products to ensure an even distribution.

To make water soluble distribution easier, there is a device called a siphoning mixer. Some research being conducted to improve organic fertilization is promising; for example, Dr. Tim Smalley's research at the University of Georgia's School of Horticulture emphasized

convenience. He found that composted hen litter continued to release nutrients for four years when it had been rototilled into flower beds in a 2 inch layer.

Another task that is necessary during hot Georgia summers is watering; a wise and economical suggestion is to time your watering for best efficiency. If you water after midnight and before noon, less water will evaporate and there will be time for the water to soak into the soil. Using soaker hoses in beds also saves time and effort; the hoses can be incorporated into the bed and covered with pine straw to camouflage their presence. Since the soaker hose applies water only to the roots, foliage is kept drier and reduces the danger of leaf diseases.

Conversely, another danger to most ornamentals is overwatering; root rot happens easily when soil is soggy. Watch for yellowing leaves or fragile stems and let the soil dry out before adding more water. Most experts agree that the best plan is to water deeply once per week and to mix in organic amendments before planting which will save time and money in the long run. Appropriate mulching also reduces the need to water and maintains the appearance of beds; most gardeners seem to agree that fine textured mulches are the most effective.

The colorful annuals that you planted will continue to flower if you regularly remove fading or wilting blooms. If they are allowed to make seed, the plant will think that their purpose in life has been completed and there is no need to continue to flower. The deadheading will additionally improve the appearance of your garden without having to spend any more money. This is also true if you tidy any plants that have scrappy leaves, dead stems and faded flowers. Even your tired plants look better when they are neat.

Keeping the garden neat also includes being diligent for any insect pests that are abundant in our hot and humid environment. Spider mites love the heat and humidity, and they are difficult to control. Be suspicious if you observe lighter colored or stippling of leaves. Spray top and bottom of leaves with water and use horticulture oil sprays which will smother the mites. However, there are a great many pests that are flying, crawling and burrowing in your garden. To win the fight, it is critical to know your enemy and use the correct treatment.

If you encounter insect pests that you do not recognize, contact the extension office by calling 770-836-8546 or send questions via email to ccmg@uga.edu. Fighting pests smart will save you time and money just as it does in planting, watering, mulching, and grooming. If you use these methods, you should shed the summer slump from your garden without breaking the bank or exhausting your energy.

