

ASK A MASTER GARDENER

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Sunny Border Flowers

Q. How do I choose flowering plants for a colorful sunny border? Can the plant information labels help me decide?

A. Lucky you - a sunny border is the easiest place to have color in your garden, with an almost overwhelming variety of plants to choose from. There are a few simple ways to decide which plants you'd like for your own garden.

A popular way to select your garden plants is to plant only certain colors. An all-white garden is beautiful by the back porch at night, and especially if you choose fragrant flowers like Brugmansia, Confederate Jasmine, Gardenia or Honeysuckle.

Some gardeners stick with cool colors, choosing blues and purples for flowers (Salvia, Cornflower, Scabiosa, Iris, Russian Sage) and accenting with foliage that has a grey or blue cast (Lamb's Ears, Artemisia, Sedums). Some of the Wave petunias have a blue or purple cast to their bright magenta blooms, and can provide a lovely accent to the cool tones.

For a hot, eye-popping garden, fill your beds with yellow, orange and red flowers. Cannas, Rudbeckia, Gallardia and Coreopsis all have bright bold flowers, and don't mind our dry summers. Variegated Cannas, such as Tropicanna, with its golden and green striped leaves add color and visual texture to the design. Marigolds and zinnias are annuals that will fill in nicely in the warm-toned bed.

Rather than limiting color choices, there's the 'go with your gut' selection method, which, in spite of my intent to have a plan, is the way I really do choose a lot of my plants. I wander around local nurseries, staying in the sunny plant section since I have no shade in my yard, and I pick up whatever plants catch my eye that day. Reading the label that's stuck in the pot is important. At the front of the bed, I'll be looking for a low growing plant, perhaps 6" to 12" high. For the middle of the flowerbed, look for a mature size of 12" to 24" high. You'll find plants for the back of the bed that top out at 3, 4 or even 5 feet high.

The plant labels will also tell you how far apart to space the plants. To make it easy, just remember that the spacing refers to the center of each hole you dig. I measure the size of my flowerbed before shopping, so I can tell by the labels how many of each plant will fit. A minimum of three of each plant will give you a nice sized group for a good impact.

To avoid losing your new plants to the winter weather, one important feature to look for

on the label is the hardiness zone. This refers to the tolerance to cold that the plant can bear. In the US, the zones range from 4 in the Northeast to 10 in the southernmost regions. Our region in West Georgia is in zone 7b. I usually stick with plants that have a rating of zone 5, 6 or 7, which means if we have a bitter winter, I needn't worry about losing any delicate plants.

It's easy to make a colorful and long-lasting flower border when you take advantage of all the useful information on the label that comes with your new plant. Cold and heat hardiness, mature height and width, water and soil requirements; all the information you need to locate your plant correctly is on the label, as well as flower and leaf color and form.

For more information on flowering annuals, perennials and woody ornamentals, stop by for free publications at the UGA Extension office at the Carroll County Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton, or call the Master Gardener office with your gardening questions at 770-836-8546.