Year-Round Color in the Landscape

by Jana Mercado, UC Master Gardener

Would you like to have color in your yard year round? One benefit of living in California is the long gardening season and the luxury of growing a wide variety of plants. Although we experience more of a four-season climate in the Valley than do our coastal neighbors, most of our seasons still offer fairly mild weather conditions when compared to other states. Fall in the valley is the best gardening season of all. Right now the weather is mild, plants establish easily, and it's the perfect time to plant almost anything. It is an ideal time to plan and plant for year-round color in the landscape.

Color can be achieved by the use of trees, shrubs, vines, ground cover, perennials, annuals and bulbs. To achieve year-round color, choose plants based on their show of flowers, foliage, fruits, and stems for the season. For example, some good tree choices for fall foliage color in our climate zones, which are zones 8 and 9, are the ginkgo (maidenhair tree), tulip tree, liquidambar (sweet gum), Chinese pistache, and Chinese tallow. When selecting the plants at the nursery, choose specimens showing the best color. For a display of fall blooming shrubs try abelia (pink flowers) and plumbago (long lasting pale blue flowers).

Perennials offering a huge assortment of autumn flower color are chrysanthemums and roses, while some annuals to set out are snapdragons, poppies and pansies to provide continuous color through spring. Fall is also the time to plant bulbs for later bloom. Some bulbs to try are crocus, freesia, iris, hyacinth, peonies, ranunculus, and, of course, tulips. These bulbs will brighten your borders in the spring.

In spite of the dreary fog and occasional freeze, the Central Valley has a gentle winter for gardening. Although deciduous trees will drop their leaves, conifers like pines, cypress, and junipers can provide your landscape with various shades and textures of green, blue, and yellow foliage. Bark texture and branch color shouldn't be overlooked either. Several dogwood species show off striking red stems when all leaves have dropped. Shrubs offering winter color are camellias, forsythia and flowering quince, which all provide spectacular blooms. Bundles of red berries are displayed by pyracantha, hollies, toyon, and heavenly bamboo. The Euryops daisy is dotted with yellow flowers on lacey green foliage throughout the of winter. Some of my favorite winter annuals are primroses, pansies and, my very favorite, Iceland poppies. I like their sherbet shades and graceful blooms in January and February.

Spring is full of surprise. It can be early or late, cool or warm, windy or rainy, but it is always full of color. Many trees burst into bloom in spring including the flowering fruit trees like crabapples, cherries, pears and plums, the fruit and nut trees like those in commercial orchards, and a host of ornamental trees like acacias.

Two of my favorite spring blooming trees are the western redbud, which offers a multitude of small deep fuschia blooms, and the dogwood, which displays a profusion of lovely white or pink blossoms. Also jumping out early in spring are the purple and white blooms of the saucer magnolia. Many shrubs are faithful spring bloomers in our valley including the azalea, which although it offers a short-lived display, is well worth the effort.

The intense heat of summer actually makes it the most challenging garden season. However it provides plenty of sunshine to encourage bountiful blooms and ample opportunity to explore a full range of color choices. Some sturdy, dependable options are the crape myrtle, plumbago, oleander, hydrangea, and, of course, roses. Salvia and lantana are also successful in our summer heat, as are cosmos, zinnia, verbena and Madagascar periwinkle.

There are many more colorful landscape plants from which to choose. The plants I've mentioned are some of my favorites that are easy to grow. A good way to plan for year-round color is to consult gardening books that indicate the season of bloom. Choose plants you like, but make sure they are suited for our climate zone. Consult with local nursery staff before you buy.

Another way to research possibilities is to drive around your neighborhood and see what's blooming, take notes and plan your design. In our climate it's fairly easy to design a garden for year-round color. So do some planning, designing, and digging, and you can enjoy color in your garden year-round.

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