

How many times have you bent over a beautiful flower expecting to experience a fragrance that rivaled the charm of the blossom? And there was none. Not a whiff. Oh, what a let-down.

Plant breeders have been developing bigger, more attractive and longer lasting blooms for us for a long time now, but fragrance has not been a priority in breeding. Just pick up a seed catalogue or walk into a well stocked garden center and your visual sense will be overwhelmed.

The future may hold some pleasant changes for plant lovers. A team of scientists at the University of Florida is working with some genes that control how chemicals in a flower are mixed to produce fragrance. By working with these chemical compounds, researchers hope to be able to adjust the fragrance as well as the level of intensity. Someday we may be able to purchase petunias and geraniums with or without a scent.

We already have a few fragrant annuals that you can set out in the spring garden starting around March 1st. These include Alyssum, Phlox and Sweet William. All of these will have optimal growth in the full sun, but the Sweet William will also do well in just morning or afternoon sun. Later in March you can set out Dahlia and Nicotiana plants which are also fragrant. The Dahlia prefers part sun while the Nicotiana grows best in full sun.

Although they are not blessed with scent yet, the following bedding plants are recommended for planting in North Florida gardens beginning March 1st. Full sun plants include Ageratum, Aster, Browallia, Calendula, Geranium, Pentas, Thunbergia, Verbena and Zinnia. Nonstop Begonias and Streptocarpus prefer part sun, and tuberous Begonias need light, but not direct hot sunlight. Go to the website <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/mg319> for planting dates of other bedding plants.

An annual planting site should be well prepared in advance of buying plants. Spade or till at least six inches deep while working in several inches of compost or peat. This addition of organic matter helps improve our sandy soil's ability to retain water and nutrients longer. Plants benefit by being able to use applied fertilizer, and the environment benefits by having less fertilizer leach into underground water.

Bedding plants are usually purchased in plastic cell packs or in small 4 inch pots. Plants should be young, dark green and healthy, with no signs of disease or insects. If they have grown tall and leggy, they can be trimmed back to half their height. Root systems that are pot-bound should be carefully loosened and untangled as you plant.

Your new planting bed can be fertilized before or at planting time with a complete fertilizer, preferably with slow release nitrogen. Repeat applications according to the directions. Water in the plants immediately and continue to water daily until they become established. Continue to water through dry spells and hot weather on an "as needed" basis.

To learn more about preparing your flower beds for spring planting, attend the free workshop at the Columbia County Extension Office on the fairgrounds in Lake City on Tuesday, March 2nd, at 6:15pm. The Master Gardeners will also demonstrate how to make Hypertufa flower pots. Have some pots on hand to grow some beautiful and fragrant flowers. *(Published 2-28-10)*