

Selecting Transplants

When buying petunias for spring planting, select compact, stocky plants. Tall, spindly plants take considerably longer to recover from transplanting. Harden plants outdoors for a few days before planting in the garden. Initially place plants in a shady, protected location; gradually expose them to longer periods of direct sun. Bring plants indoors if freezing temperatures are predicted.

Planting

Petunias can be transplanted into the garden after the danger of frost has passed. It's usually safe to begin planting petunias in late April in southern Iowa and in mid-May in northern parts of the state.

Petunias perform best in sunny locations. They also require a moderately fertile, well-drained soil. Poorly drained soils often can be improved by incorporating organic matter, such as compost, peat, or well-rotted manure.

Plant petunias about 12 inches apart. The spreading types should be planted 2 to 2 1/2 feet apart. Pinch back grandifloras and multifloras to encourage branching. Pinching is especially helpful for tall, leggy plants. Millifloras and spreading petunias usually don't require pinching.

Maintenance

During dry weather, a deep soaking once every 7 to 10 days should be sufficient for petunias in beds and borders. Plants in containers will need to be watered more frequently. Check containers frequently and water when the soil surface becomes dry. Petunias grown in containers should be fertilized every 2 weeks with a soluble fertilizer.



To encourage additional blooms and improve plant appearance, remove the spent flowers on grandiflora and double petunias. The smaller flowering types, such as the milliflora and spreading petunias, are self-cleaning and don't require deadheading.

Leggy petunias can be rejuvenated by cutting them back to about half their length in mid-summer. After pruning, fertilize and water the plants to promote new growth.

For more information

Information on selection, planting, cultural practices, and environmental quality is available from local Iowa State University Extension offices and at these ISU Web sites:

ISU Extension Distribution Center
www.extension.iastate.edu/store

ISU Horticulture
www.yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu

Reiman Gardens
www.reimangardens.iastate.edu

If you want to learn more about horticulture through training and volunteer work, ask your ISU Extension office for information about the ISU Extension Master Gardener program, or visit www.mastergardener.iastate.edu.

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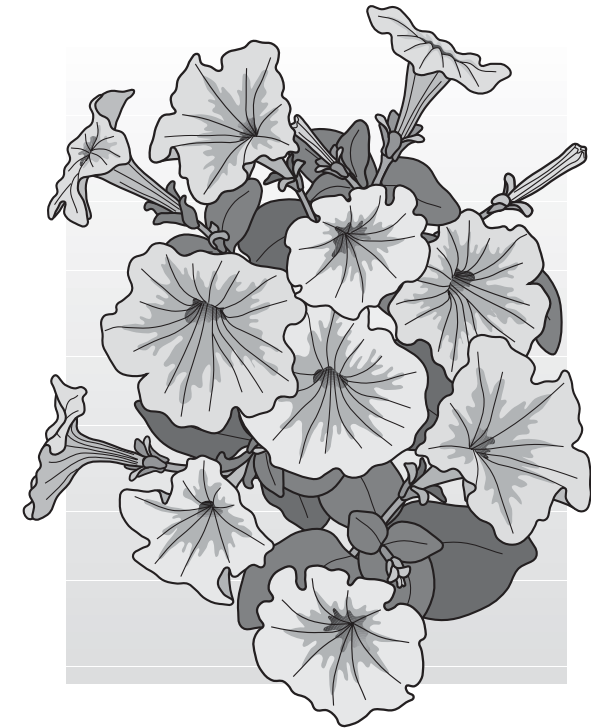
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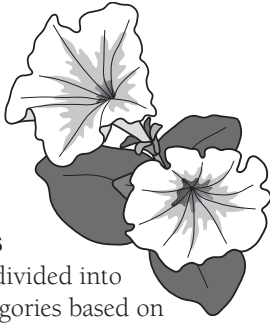
Growing Petunias



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University Extension

Petunias are easy to grow, bloom reliably all summer, and are available in a wide range of colors, flower forms, and growth habits.



Types of Petunias

Petunia varieties can be divided into four main groups or categories based on flower and growth habits: grandiflora, multiflora, milliflora, and spreading or groundcover.

Grandifloras have large single or double flowers. Single grandifloras produce large blooms up to 5 inches across. Some single varieties have ruffled or fringed petals. Others possess a trailing habit that make them ideal for window boxes and hanging baskets. Double grandifloras produce double, fringed flowers and are best suited to containers. Generally, grandifloras (single and double) don't flower as heavily as multifloras. Also, the flowers don't hold up as well during rainy weather. Plants often become unkempt and straggly by late summer. Popular grandiflora petunias include varieties in the Supercascade, Dreams, Ultra, and Storm Series.

Multiflora petunias produce smaller flowers than the grandifloras, but in greater quantity. Both single and double varieties are available. Multifloras are generally more compact and resistant to wet weather than the grandifloras. Single multifloras are excellent in mass plantings in flower beds. Double multifloras are most

Series refers to a group of closely related varieties with uniform characteristics, such as height, spread, and flowering habit. Generally, the only variable within a series is flower color.

suitable for containers. Excellent multiflora petunias include varieties in the Celebrity, Primetime, and Carpet Series.

Milliflora petunias are compact, miniature plants that produce large numbers of 1- to 1 1/2-inch-diameter flowers. Their compact size makes them an excellent choice for containers and edging beds and borders. Varieties in the Fantasy Series are widely grown milliflora petunias.

Spreading or groundcover petunias are vigorous, low-growing plants that spread like groundcovers. By the end of summer, some varieties may cover an area 3 to 4 feet in diameter. Spreading petunias possess excellent heat and drought tolerance and require little maintenance. They are excellent choices for hanging baskets, containers, and as an annual groundcover. Spreading petunias include those in the Wave, Tidal Wave, Avalanche, Ramblin, and Easy Wave Series.

Starting Seeds Indoors

Although most gardeners buy transplants, petunias can be started indoors 10 to 12 weeks before the last average frost date. Late February/early March is an appropriate sowing date in Iowa.

A commercially prepared product, such as Jiffy Mix or Redi-earth, is a good germination medium. Containers used for starting seeds should be clean and have drainage holes in the bottom. Previously used containers should be washed in soapy water and then disinfected by dipping in a solution containing one part chlorine bleach and nine parts water.

Fill the container with the germination medium to within 1/2 to 1 inch of the top and press lightly to firm. Moisten by partially submerging the container in water until the surface becomes wet

or by using a rubber bulb sprinkler. Allow the container to drain for 30 to 60 minutes before sowing seeds.

Petunia seeds are very small—approximately 250,000 to 300,000 seeds per ounce—and thus hard to sow. Pelleted petunia seeds are coated with a material to make them larger and easier to handle. Carefully sow the seeds on the soil surface, then gently press the seeds into the germination medium with a pencil or a small block of wood.

Petunia seeds require light for germination. They should not be covered with additional material.

Uniform medium temperatures and moisture are required for optimum seed germination. Place the container in a warm (75 to 80°F) location in bright light. To maintain uniform moisture levels, place a piece of clear plastic food wrap over the container. Clear plastic domes also are available. Do not set the covered container in direct sunlight. The high temperatures that may develop in direct sunlight may inhibit or prevent germination. Petunia seeds should germinate in 10 to 12 days.

Remove the plastic covering as soon as seedlings emerge. Place the container under fluorescent lights or in a sunny window. Fluorescent lights should be no more than 6 to 8 inches above the growing plants and should be left on for 12 to 16 hours. Temperatures should be 60 to 65°F.

When seedlings have 3 true leaves, transplant into plastic cell packs, peat pots, or other containers. To produce stocky plants, keep the seedlings in a cool location under fluorescent lights or in a sunny window, allow the potting soil to dry between waterings, and fertilize every 2 weeks with a dilute fertilizer solution. Harden the seedlings outdoors a few days before planting into the garden.