

Cool Season Annuals

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SPEAKERS

Speaker 3, Christa Hartsook, Aaron Steil, Olivia Hanlon

Christa Hartsook 00:15

Hello, and welcome to the Small Farms Podcast, a production of the Small Farms Program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Our podcast covers the opportunities and challenges associated with rural life.

Olivia Hanlon 00:29

In this episode, I visit with Aaron Steil, Consumer Horticulture Specialist with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Today we are talking about cool season annuals. I'm Olivia Hanlon, Farm Food and Enterprise Development Education Extension Specialist and we hope you enjoy the show. Aaron, welcome back. Glad to have you joining us today.

Aaron Steil 00:48

Yeah, thanks for the invite again. I always enjoy talking about gardening with folks.

Olivia Hanlon 00:54

Absolutely. So in case folks don't remember, why don't we start out with a quick reminder for everyone on what your role is here at Iowa State.

Aaron Steil 01:02

Sure. Well as the Consumer Horticulture Extension Specialist, I work with all of the staff at the 100 County Extension offices across the state to help them address all of the many different home gardening questions that they get in their office every day.

O Olivia Hanlon 01:25

Awesome. So like I said, today we're talking about cool season annuals. So let's go ahead and dive in there. What exactly qualifies a plant as a cool season annual?

A Aaron Steil 01:34

So these are annual plants that prefer cooler temperatures, and they grow best in spring or fall. So most of them are, actually all of them are tolerant of a light frost and can actually survive in many cases down to at least 28 degrees Fahrenheit, sometimes even colder with very little damage to the leaves or flowers. So they make a really great addition to planters, in particular, or other garden beds this time of year in the fall or really early in the spring months.

O Olivia Hanlon 02:08

Okay. So Aaron, what plants are considered cool season annuals?

A Aaron Steil 02:12

Well, there are quite a few out there. Some are more common than others. Some of the most common that you'll find are things like pansy, ornamental cabbage and kale, snapdragons, let's see mums, nasturtium, sweet alyssum, dianthus, which is sometimes called pinks, or sweet William, things like Swiss chard, and beets, sweet pea, and then there's a lot of other maybe not quite so common plants, but are really fun if you can find them by seed. Things like bachelor's button, pot marigold (which is not the same as regular marigold, it's a completely different species), Nierembergia, cape daisy (which is a fun one that you often see more often in the spring than the fall because it has really spring colors), nemesia, California poppy, bells of Ireland, there's quite a few different plants that do well, in those cooler temperatures.

O Olivia Hanlon 03:08

Okay, so I recognized a few of those Aaron, but not very many of them.

A Aaron Steil 03:13

Well, and this is where online sources â€” seed catalogs and those kinds of things can be really wonderful. Sometimes they'll even organize them as cool season annuals or annuals for late or early season. So you can find them most of those grow pretty easily from seed. There's also a few perennial plants or plants that we typically think of as perennials, that we can treat like annuals that tolerate these cool temperatures really well, and chrysanthemum is the most common one. But also things like coral bells, a lot of the setums, and Black Eyed Susan are great. Sometimes we can find them relatively inexpensive. They're relatively inexpensive in the stores and we can treat them like annuals, even though we can technically grow them as perennials too.

○ Olivia Hanlon 04:02

Okay, very good to know, Aaron. So when we're looking at all of those plants that we can plant, what are some of the best options or what are some of the things that are easy to be successful with this fall?

○ Aaron Steil 04:14

Yeah, in the fall, mums are very easy. They're available everywhere and they're really a harbinger of fall, right. So when we think of this time of year, we think of things like pumpkins and mums, and so they're a great addition to containers or annual garden beds. The thing to keep in mind though, is that we often think of chrysanthemums as a perennial, and there are many varieties or cultivars of mums that aren't winter hardy for us, and nearly all mums whether they are technically winter hardy for us here in Iowa or not, when planted this late in the season are not going to overwinter very well. And so when you go out to the store in September and October and buy mums, they really are to be treated as an annual, they are not very likely to overwinter, but you can still enjoy them. Their beautiful colors, all of that stuff as an annual. And so I say that often because I don't want to give folks false hope, right like, and we buy this thing thinking, 'oh, I'm going to have it as a perennial. I'm going to have it year after year after year,' and it almost never works out that way. But if you go into it, knowing that you're only going to use it for this short period of time, which is how most annual plants are, then you can be really happy with what you get out of the plant that you purchased in the fall. The other big ones this time of year, pansy are fairly easy to find this time of year, and the ornamental cabbage and kale, as well as ornamental beets and swiss chard are pretty readily available in the fall and super easy to grow as annuals in containers or garden beds.


○ Olivia Hanlon 06:02

Okay, so when we're looking at getting some of those planted, what time frame should we be looking at trying to get those in the ground?

○ Aaron Steil 06:10

Most of the time, we are transitioning from the stuff that we had during the summer into the fall, and so for cool season annuals in the fall, the best time to get them in containers or in the ground is usually around mid-September. It's going to be a little hard to do this "I find this very hard anyway" because often your summer annuals are looking pretty good, although sometimes they're pretty overgrown, actually. Often, they're pretty overgrown and big. And so you see these big growing summer annuals like your Coleus and your Impatiens and all those things, and you think, 'Oh, how can I tear this out before frost comes?' But mid-September is a good time to do that. You're establishing these plants so that you have something beyond frost, if you didn't do this, then all those wonderful plants that you grew all summer would be dead that first cold night. So this gives you an opportunity to extend the season, even though it's a little hard to do that in mid-September. If you want to use cool season annuals very first thing


in the spring, usually after spring break for most of us. But before the first part of April is a good time, you have to kind of watch the weather, but that's usually a good time to establish cool season annuals in the early spring.

 Olivia Hanlon 07:25


Okay, Aaron, so I know I had the same problem, and my dead summer plants are still in my planters right now. We are looking at the end of September here, is now still a good time to get those things put in?

 Aaron Steil 07:38


Absolutely. And there's still lots available in the stores, garden centers, all over the place. So you can do it pretty much any time during the fall, but you can enjoy them the most establishing them about mid-September.

 Olivia Hanlon 07:50

Very good. So when we're looking at taking care of our plants after we get them into the ground, is there anything that we need to do that would be different than our summer plants? Or is there any special care that we need to take about our cool season annuals?

 Aaron Steil 08:04

No, the care is fairly similar to our summer annuals water when needed. You could put a little bit of fertilizer in when you first plant them, but you don't need to fertilize them a lot. These plants are fairly short term. In our summer annuals are typically around mid-May through mid-September. That's a fairly long stretch for an annual plant anyway, these plants are going to be around for about half that amount of time. So fertilizer isn't as essential. They probably got plenty of fertilizer in greenhouse or in the nursery. So you can put a little bit fertilizer but it's not a requirement. Water when needed, and then enjoy.

 Olivia Hanlon 08:40

Okay, I know I said this about our fall garden too, Aaron, but these are looking like my kind of plants. The less the better for me.

 Aaron Steil 08:47

Ha, ha, yes.

 Olivia Hanlon 08:48

So when we're looking at winter creeping up on us here, what happens when frost hits? What do we need to do to prepare them? And how do we know when their time is up?

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Aaron Steil 08:58

Yeah, so most of them are going to survive that first cold night, maybe even the second one. So you don't have to worry about doing anything to them kind of early on in the start of those cool temperatures.

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Olivia Hanlon 09:13

Okay.

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Aaron Steil 09:13

They'll survive just fine. They'll even have a little bit of frost on the leaves in the morning and then they'll be fine the rest of the day. Sometimes I like to kind of just leave this stuff in place. If you're the kind of gardener that loves to decorate containers for the holidays. So you know with like evergreen branches and bows and those kinds of things. Then you would pull this stuff out around the time that you would decorate for the holidays. A lot of it will probably still be green at that time. But you can leave it in place depending on the winter and the snow cover. If we have good snow cover, which acts as a blanket, some of these things may even overwinter so it's not uncommon for something like a pansy or some of these ornamental kales and cabbages to actually survive the winter and then color up again in the spring. They're not usually quite as attractive as they were in the fall, but it is kind of a fun thing to find in the springtime. So they don't have to be pulled out over the winter, you can just wait until spring and pull them out then if you're not going to be decorating for the holidays, or putting evergreens in your containers for the winter months.

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Olivia Hanlon 10:19

Okay, Aaron, I know a common practice, or at least I know, my mom used to do this "with heavy frost looking at covering them with sheets. Is that something we should be concerned about or not?

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Aaron Steil 10:29

No, you don't have to worry about that. Well, it's certainly important for those plants that aren't cool season annuals, you know, often that very first frost comes and you know, it'll be one or two cold nights, and then we're going to have another week where it's not freezing temperatures again, and we would love to hold on to those plants for that extra week. So covering those plants can help with that, especially if it's a real light freeze like it gets down to like 32° or 31°. That allows us to kind of extend the life of those plants that normally wouldn't tolerate those temperatures. But these cool season annuals do tolerate those temperatures really well. So we don't have to provide that same level of protection when those

first cold nights come. So it is a nice way to kind of I guess reduce a little bit of that work too, because we keep the color of those mums and pansies and those kinds of plants without having to carve out all the bricks to hold down these sheets and watching the weather forecast super carefully to make sure that we do it on the right night and all that stuff. That's important if we want to hold on to our Coleus a little bit longer, but it's not necessary for these cool season annuals.

O Olivia Hanlon 11:44

Okay, that is good to know. So Aaron, like I mentioned, I've got some containers out front that I'm looking to put something in. When I'm looking at that, and our listeners are looking at that, are there certain cool season annuals that are better suited for our containers than some of the others?

A Aaron Steil 12:00

You know, most of them are really nice in containers, all of this stuff could do well in a garden bed as well. But in many cases, containers are where cool season annuals have their biggest impact, because we usually put containers in places where people see them because containers are kind of a lot of work. So we want to make sure that they're enjoying the most. So, you know, they're typically by the front door, they're typically hanging on the front porch, those kinds of things. And all of these cool season annuals do pretty well in those containers.

O Olivia Hanlon 12:32

Okay, then is there anything we need to do differently for our plants that are in our containers versus our plants that are in the ground?

A Aaron Steil 12:40

No, the timing will be the same, the care will be the same, water when needed. Maybe fertilize if you really want to push them along, but they're not in the ground as long as other annuals so they'll probably be okay. The care is pretty much the same. You will be watering more often with containers, but that's true with any planting containers. Containers dry out more quickly in most situations compared to the garden bed.

O Olivia Hanlon 13:05

For sure. So Aaron, if people are looking for more information on anything that we've covered today, or if they have questions, where should they look or who should they reach out to?

A Aaron Steil 13:14

Yeah, so your local county extension office has some great resources available. As well, there

are resources available on the Hort News website. So if you go to hortnews.extension.iastate.edu, so that's Hort news "H, O, R, T, N, E, W, S" hortnews, that website has a whole section of frequently asked questions. If you type in 'cool season annuals,' you'll get all sorts of questions there and a recently published article on this very topic is on the front page right now. So that's a great spot to get a good list of these plants, and know when to plant them and how to treat them and all of that great information.

O Olivia Hanlon 13:56

Awesome. So Aaron, is there anything that we didn't cover today that you'd like to add?

A Aaron Steil 14:00

I just think this is a really fun project and one that most people who are growing annuals don't necessarily do but can be a really nice way to extend the season well into November for most years, depending on the weather and enjoy the outdoors a little bit more. So it's a fun way to you know, often in the fall, we're focused on getting ready for winter, and cool season annuals are a great way to get ready for fall. To be gardening for the season we're in, instead of preparing for something that's coming up, and that's always enjoyable. So it's a really fun way to do a little bit more this time of year. It's something I would encourage people "even if it's just one container, and one month, give it a try.

O Olivia Hanlon 14:50

All right, Aaron so before I let you go today, I have to ask you one last question. What is your favorite cool season annual and why?

A Aaron Steil 14:58

Oh, you know anytime somebody asks to pick your favorite plant, it's kind of like asking which one of your kids is your favorite kid. It's hard to say for sure. I do enjoy the ornamental cabbages and kales because they're a little unexpected, and the cool season, or the cool weather in the fall, brings the colors out even more. So you get these really beautiful often pinks, whites, sometimes reds, dark greens, almost purpley colors, they really pop. It's not because of flowers. It's because of foliage, which I think is really fun. And they are literally the same species that we eat. They're just a selection that has really nice color. And so they can almost do double duty, right? Like you could, in theory, harvest and eat these plants too. So I just think that's fun. I think it's a neat, unexpected thing to try in the fall and they're really beautiful. So today, at this time, I would say that plant. Ask me tomorrow, I'll probably have something different.

O Olivia Hanlon 16:06

All right. Well, thank you, Aaron for sharing that with us and for joining us today.

A Aaron Steil 16:11
You're welcome. Thanks for the invitation.

O Olivia Hanlon 16:14
Absolutely.

S Speaker 3 16:15
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