

Native Annuals for Color in the Garden

by Cindy Gilberg

Gardeners, ready to move beyond the ordinary, seek out the unusual to add to their gardens. Lesser known than the typical marigolds, petunias and zinnias, Missouri's native annuals are outstanding in their own right and merit use in the landscape. These Midwest natives deliver color with unpretentious flowers that appear delicate, yet are borne on very hardy, reliable plants. The plants mentioned below grow naturally in Missouri and are good choices for home landscaping. All of them have been studied in the Whitmire Wildflower Garden's home-gardening and groundcover areas.

Blue-eyed Mary (*Collinsia verna*) is a shade-loving winter annual that germinates in November or December and blooms in early spring along with wild sweet William and Virginia bluebells. Its hardy purple-speckled seedlings freeze and thaw all winter without damage. This plant will not reseed unless leaves are either raked up or burned off in autumn. Only mulch lightly after plants have flowered and gone to seed in late May or early June.



(*Collinsia verna*)

Plains coreopsis (*Coreopsis tinctoria*) is very showy with sprays of bright yellow daisy flowers that sway in the summer wind. Most of the flowers are highlighted with a red center, looking like small painted sunflowers. Reaching 3-4 feet in height, *Coreopsis* is a striking companion to plantings of grasses, blazingstar and blue false indigo. Plains coreopsis will reseed lightly from year to year.

Blue waxweed (*Cuphea viscosissima*) has deep rose-pink to magenta flowers from mid-summer to autumn and reaches 18 inches in height and spread. It is a cousin to and closely resembles Mexican heather, an annual commonly seen at local garden centers. It reseeds from year to year. *Cuphea* is noted as a potential edible oil crop and is frequently mentioned in homeopathic medicine for treating intestinal disorders.



(*Cuphea viscosissima*)



(*Erysimum capitatum*)

Western wallflower (*Erysimum capitatum*) is one of the showiest native annuals and may have clear-yellow or light-orange flowers. It begins blooming in April and blooms through spring along with rose verbena, blue wild indigo, and spiderworts. The plants top out at 2-3 feet and reseed lightly from year to year. It is a biennial but should be planted annually to get a consistent showy bloom.

Narrow-leaved sneezeweed (*Helenium amarum*) is an annual with abundant lemon-yellow flowers all summer. This robust little plant grows to 15 inches and is useful grown in the front of planting beds and containers. It seldom spreads from seed. Thread-like leaves give it a fine texture that blends well with many other natives such as New Jersey tea, American aloe and *Penstemon*.

Delicate rose-lavender flowers and narrow leaves grace palafox (*Palafoxia callosa*), giving it an airy appearance similar to baby's breath. It grows 2-3 feet tall and is a nice companion to late-summer blooming sunflowers, asters and goldenrods. Palafox blooms from late summer until first frost and reseeds readily from year to year.



(Palafoxia callosa)



(Polanisia dodecandra)

Polanisia dodecandra is a lovely annual that resembles its common garden relative *Cleome*. The stems, leaves and seed pods of this 2-3 foot tall plant are covered with tiny, sticky hairs, and have a strong odor when touched. Its clustered flowers bloom for 2-3 months in summer and have long, reddish 'whiskers' of stamens. Butterflies and clearwing hummingbird moths love it and are frequently seen hovering to sip some nectar from the beautiful pale pink flowers. It reseeds lightly from year to year.

All of these thrive in average to dry, rocky soil. In container gardens these gems perform well holding their own through the heat of summer. In gardens they may be grown as a bedding plant in masses or left to spread around in a more natural way. If you do not want seedlings to spread, a layer of mulch should be set out in autumn. If you want to grow your own every year, be sure to collect seed, and store dry until spring. You may also look for seedlings in spring to move around or pot up. Either way, a perpetual supply of native annual color in the garden is easy with a minimum amount of energy.

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