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Cut Flowers Made Easy

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Cut flowers have long been a staple of both home gardens and the floral trade, prized for their beauty, seasonality and ability to connect people more closely to the garden. In recent years, interest has grown not only in buying flowers, but in growing them locally, sustainably and with an eye toward quality and variety.

Over the last 15 years or so, there's been a resurgence in growing "backyard" cut flowers. This has expanded into a global boutique industry where both homeowners and small business owners are growing cut flowers for use in the home, as well as for sale to local florists, sales at farmer's markets and to supply local cut flower consortia. The Philadelphia Floral Guild started in 2022 with the mission to change the global floral industry and make it more sustainable. They buy locally grown flowers direct from regional farms and then resell the cut flowers in the Philadelphia area.

To get started growing cut flowers, start with those that are "easy to grow." Recently, I spoke with Caroline Eells, owner of Passiflora Studio in Marietta, Ohio, to get her list of easy-to-grow cut flowers.

Easy Annuals

At the top of Caroline's list are zinnias. Zinnia elegans is an old-fashioned annual that has seen a resurgence. Many of the plant breeding companies are actively working on new cultivars that make great cut flowers. Benary's Giant Series is a large robust zinnia with dahlia-like flowers up to 4 to 6 in. across. Like all zinnias, they're easily grown from seed in the spring. Some interesting colors in the series include carmine, scarlet, orange, bright pink, golden, salmon and many more. The Oklahoma Series has sturdy stems with an abundance of smaller semi-double and double flowers. Salmon, scarlet and white are popular selections of this series. The Zinderella Series has flowers that resemble coneflowers, scabiosa or gerberas. Color forms on the Zinderella Series include "antique" colors like peach, lilac and pastels.



Snapdragons (*Antirrhinum majus*) with particularly long stems, which give them a longer vase life, are especially popular. Madame Butterfly mix grows 24- to 26-in. tall and colors include bronze, ivory, cherry, pink, yellow and peach with large ruffled, double petals. Like zinnias, snapdragons are very easy to cultivate from seed.

Of all the annual cut flowers, there perhaps has been the greatest renaissance with dahlias. Historically, dahlias have been cultivated for over a century. Typically, a home gardener might have a few dahlia plants, but today I know of two local hobbyists who literally have hundreds of plants representing dozens of cultivars. Dahlias are grown from a potato-like tuber that can be harvested in the fall and overwintered in cellar-like conditions to be grown again the next year. Every year at Longwood Gardens, there's a Dahlia Show produced in partnership with The Greater Philadelphia Dahlia Society. Events like this and others have helped to contribute to the rebirth and renewed interest in growing dahlias.

Dahlias thrive in full sun and can grow in a variety of soils as long as they're well-drained. There are many ornamental types of dahlias, including decorative, single-flowered, cactus, anemone-flowered, peony-flowered, ball and pompon. Each flower has a long flower stem, which can be harvested once they come into flower. Over the course of the summer, there will be an amazing abundance of flowers produced for each plant up until frost. My favorite variety of dahlias include Honka Pink, Mediterranee, American Sunset, Waltzing Matilda, Boom Boom White and Sweet Suzanne.

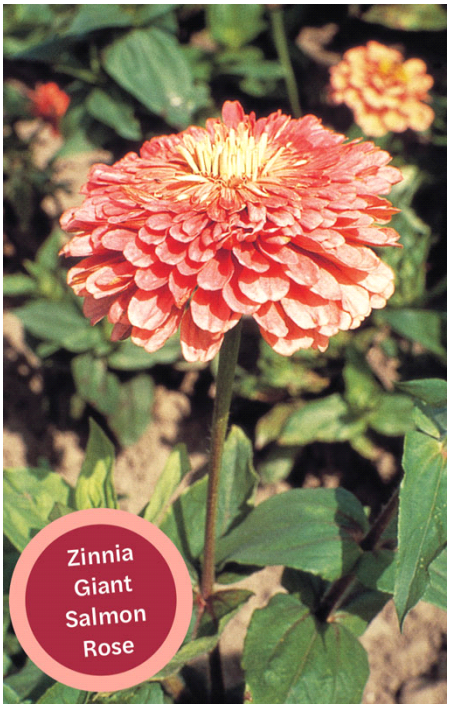


A selection of *Helleborus x hybridus*.

Popular Perennials

Using perennials as cut flowers is a way to economize since most perennials come back from year to year and expand and multiply in the garden. Caroline's favorites include black-eyed-Susan (rudbeckia), lady's mantle (*Alchemilla mollis*), coneflowers (*Echinacea purpurea*), hellebores (*Helleborus x hybridus*), ornamental onions (allium) and daffodils (narcissus).

Lady's mantle produces panicles of bright chartreuse flowers in the spring. The delicate stems can be harvested and used for filler in floral bouquets. Hellebores and complex hybrids have been becoming increasingly popular since German hybridizing in the early 1990s. Hellebores generally bloom at the end of winter, however, the Christmas rose, Helleborus niger, can bloom literally in the winter. In the garden, they're grown for the evergreen leaves, dry shade tolerance, resistance to deer and for their exquisite flowers.



David Culp's Brandywine Strain is noted for its double flowering and anemone-types with reds, pinks and apricots. Pine Knot Strain has singles, semi-doubles and doubles in a full range of colors from dark purple to nearly black to white, rose and a variety of pinks. There's also been considerable breeding work done with hellebores with many new cultivars coming to the market every year. From Hans Hansen at Walters Gardens is the Honeymoon series, which includes great cultivars like the single black New York Night, Spanish Flare with soft yellow petals and a dark purple center, and Sandy Shores, a beautiful salmon selection.

Ornamental onions (allium) have been a popular later spring bulb in the garden for years. Popular cultivars include Purple Sensation with a long-stout stem and a full orb of medium-purple flowers. Other exceptional cultivars include Globemaster and Ambassador. Mt. Everest has large white flowers, while Miami has dark purple flowers, and both Miami and Pinball Wizard have more of a softer lilac flower head.

Like hellebores, coneflowers (*Echinacea purpurea*) and other species, have had an amazing surge in popularity in the garden. They've been popularized for their pollinator benefits, too. Thirty years ago, there were just a handful of purple types, like Magnus and Kim's Knee High. Then Jim Ault at the Chicago Botanic Garden bred the first orange coneflower, and hundreds and hundreds of cultivars have followed, including more outstanding purple selections, but also orange, red, yellow and white flower types. Both the Chicago Botanic Garden and the Mt. Cuba Center have conducted extensive trials, which highlight the best-of-the-best. Both institutions have their evaluation information accessible online.

These are just a few of the many annuals and perennials well suited for use as cut flowers, selected not only for their outstanding ornamental qualities, but also for their reliability and ease of cultivation. Whether grown in a backyard garden or on a small commercial scale, these plants offer generous yields, long vase life and seasonal diversity. For growers looking to enter or expand within the cut flower market, focusing on dependable, high-performing plants is an effective way to ensure success while delivering beauty that resonates with today's consumers. **GP**

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