Petunias In The Garden

Fact Sheet FS1157

Cooperative Extension

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Petunias are, or should be, a mainstay of every garden. They come in many hues and can brighten up an area with their vibrant colors. Gardens need annuals to provide blossoms and color throughout the summer and petunias fit this purpose admirably.

Dependable and versatile petunias have been a favorite of gardeners since their introduction from South America to European gardeners around 1825. Most of the superior hybrid varieties have been developed in the United States. The new cultivars that are hybrids of several petunias species perform so well that there has been a resurgence of interest in these plants.

Petunias may be used in hanging baskets, window boxes, containers, borders, or beds. They will bloom abundantly in full sun to partial shade; a minimum of 6 hours per day of sun is required for good flowering. Choose a site with good drainage, as they do not like dry or wet soil. Incorporating compost, peat moss or composted manure can improve the soil structure.

Petunia cultivars are divided into general groups. Grandiflora petunia flowers are large, 4″ to 5″ across, fewer in number, and susceptible to rain damage so they grow better in containers sheltered from the rain. Some grandiflora varieties have double flowers. They have trailing stems and tend to spread twelve to fifteen inches. Multiflora petunias have smaller flowers, 2″ to 3″ across, in great quantities. They are more tolerant of wet weather and make good bedding plants. New cultivars are introduced each year so read the label carefully to suit the type of petunia to the situation where it is to grow. Compact miniature petunias call miniflora produce 1½″ flowers that are appropriate for hanging baskets and containers. Groundcover petunias are low growers, only around 6″, but they flower along the stem. These spreading petunias are used as colorful groundcovers and in hanging baskets and window boxes.

Petunia seeds may be started indoors 10 to 12 weeks before the last frost date. They are extremely small and may be distributed evenly if mixed with fine sand or purchased as pelleted seed. It is easier to purchase nursery-grown stock. Petunias may be planted outside after May 15 in most areas of New Jersey to avoid injury from frost.

Petunias are heat tolerant plants and do not require a lot of water. A deep watering to a depth of 6″ to 8″ once a week is sufficient for most petunias. In containers petunias will need more frequent watering. Hanging baskets may need to be watered daily, depending on the type of container and potting mix.

Fertilization of petunias growing in garden beds should be based on soil test results to reach full flowering potential. Fertilize at planting. The fertilizer can be supplemented later in the summer if needed. Petunias prefer a pH of 6.0 to 7.5.

Petunias will flower all summer until frost. They may be deadheaded (remove flowers that have finished blooming) to keep in continuous bloom. It is easier to wait until they become leggy and then cut back by half, or if low plants, cut back to 6″. New growth will branch from the base.

Pests of petunias include tobacco budworm and tomato hornworm that may be hand removed or treated with an appropriate insecticide. Common disease problems include powdery mildew and botrytis. Properly spacing the plants so that air can circulate and avoiding overhead watering can discourage these diseases. Fungicides can be used according to product labels to prevent the diseases from spreading.

As petunias are perennials in their native South American habitat, consider potting up plants for winter bloom in the home. To propagate favorite varieties, root 6″ stem sections in sand.

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