

zinnias

By Albert Parsons

••• WILL KNOCK YOUR SOCKS OFF •••

If you want vivid colour, give zinnias a try. This traditional garden favourite boasts some of the most vibrant colours of any annual. Enjoy zinnias in the garden, in containers, as seasonal cut flowers or in dried floral arrangements.

Zinnia (*Zinnia elegans* and *Z. angustifolia*) could be called a heritage flower, simply because it has been around a long time. Native to the southwest United States right through to Chile, with a major concentration in Mexico, zinnia seeds were first taken to Europe in the 18th century. The plants were named after Johann Zinn, a German anatomist and botanist who gave us the first written description of the zinnia flower. But it was not until the late 19th

century that European plant breeders began to use natural selection to develop new colours, shapes and sizes, and from that time, zinnias became more widely used as a garden flower.

By the 1920s, zinnias had caught the attention of plant breeders in the United States, who began the development of modern zinnia varieties. California Giants, with their large flat-topped flowers, were developed first.

Image courtesy Floret – floretflowers.com



In the 1950s, they were followed by the tetraploids, whose extra chromosomes produced zinnias with the characteristics gardeners desired. 'State Fair' zinnias, for example, have dahlia-like flowers that are fully double, perfectly formed and symmetrical. 'Persian Carpet' is a small flowered zinnia that produces double, semi-double and single flowers with unique stripes and bi-colours, in shades of yellow, gold and maroon. These bushy plants grow about 25 cm (10 in.) tall and have a nice mounding growth habit, which makes them good edging plants along the front of a vegetable garden or flower border. They also have long wiry stems, making them ideal for cutting. 'State Fair' and 'Persian Carpet' are both still popular today.

Sun lovers

Zinnias are grown as annuals. Because they are fast growing, they are often seeded right into the garden in the spring. For earlier plants, sow seeds indoors about four to six weeks before the last frost. Starting them earlier results in lanky plants that will not transplant well. Zinnias do not like to have their roots disturbed, so it is best to grow them in cell packs to keep root disturbance to a minimum during transplanting.

Zinnias love sun—and lots of it. When established, they are somewhat drought tolerant but they will wilt on hot days if the soil is allowed to become too dry. Zinnias perform best if soil is kept moderately moist. Too much water may result in root rot and disease.

Plants thrive in ordinary garden soil rich in humus. They benefit from deadheading. When old blooms are removed, they continue to produce flowers until fall frost cuts them down.

Zinnias are not frost tolerant. Even covers on cold autumn nights do not always protect them from injury. They should not be planted outdoors in the spring until all danger of frost is past.

These plants need their space. They do not like competition, so it is best not to crowd them in the row or by planting companion plants too close. They are happy grown in garden rows (this is the usual growing method for gardeners who use zinnias for cutting), but, zinnias can also be grown in clumps in annual or mixed borders, where they will provide season-long colour starting in late June. Shorter varieties make good edging plants, while taller ones can be placed further back in the border.

Although relatively pest free, zinnias can succumb to a number of viral wilts and blights. Minimize the threat by providing lots of direct sun and space around plants for good air circulation.

Excellent cut flowers

Zinnias are great flowers for cutting and using in arrangements. They are stiff and sturdy, so they stay where they are placed in an arrangement. Many varieties have long stems, a characteristic that enhances their appeal as cut flowers. However, modern varieties bred to produce compact plants with short stems are not good candidates for cut flowers.

You can dry zinnias successfully in silica gel. In addition to holding their colour and

1. Cut & Come Again Mix (W. Atlee Burpee Company)
2. 'Dancing Girls' (W. Atlee Burpee Company)
3. 'Dancing Girls' (W. Atlee Burpee Company)





form, they are not nearly as fragile as some dried flowers. Blooms from the Magellan series are the perfect size for this purpose, and look stunning in dried floral arrangements.

The massive dahlia flowered zinnias are spectacular in the garden, but their huge blooms are simply too large to create an ordinary-sized arrangement. Varieties with smaller blooms from 3–8 cm (1–3 in.) in diameter are preferred by floral designers.

As cut flowers, zinnias have a lengthy vase life—a zinnia arrangement will last a week, as will a vase of zinnias if the water is changed daily.

Colourful choices

Benary's is a tall series that produces blooms up to 10 cm (4 in.) in diameter. It comes in a wide range of colours, with two of the most striking being purple and scarlet. Oklahoma series is also available in a variety of beautiful colours and produces high quality double and semi-double flowers that are perfect as cut flowers. A lovely hybrid dahlia flowered zinnia called 'Up roar Rose' grows 70 cm (28 in.) high

and produces intense wine-coloured double blooms. The International Peace Garden on the Manitoba–North Dakota border has used this variety extensively in their plantings over the last couple of years, to good effect.

Another unique zinnia is aptly called 'Envy.' The perfectly formed dahlia-like blooms are six cm (2.5 in.) in diameter and an exquisite lime green much coveted by floral designers.

The 'Cut and Come' mix is another favourite, with its fully double, five cm (2 in.) blooms. They have long stems and come in a wide variety of colours—perfect for the cutting garden or the flower border. 'Pompom' zinnias are 60 cm (24 in.) tall plants that produce innumerable fully double flowers, similar to the 'Cut and Come' mix. 'Raspberry Lemonade' is a cheerful mix of single-flowering zinnias, including yellow, coral and Zahara 'Starlight Rose.' The double blossoms of 'Aztec Sunset' mix are produced in a range of warm, rich tones reminiscent of a desert sunset. This compact plant only reaches 25 cm (10 in.) high. It was awarded a 2007 Fleuroselect gold medal.

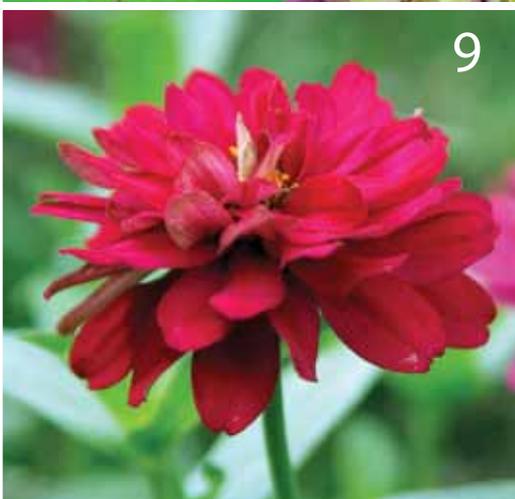
Single zinnias are used extensively in containers. The Zahara series is very popular because it only grows 30 cm (12 in.) tall, the perfect height to incorporate into a mixed container.

The Profusion series has hit the market in a big way, with a new colour in the series released almost every year. These plants produce single flowers, but in profusion, which makes them ideal for use as bedding plants. They are 30 cm (12 in.) tall and produce small five cm (2 in.) single blooms that literally cover the bushy plants. Double varieties of

4. 'Tequila Lime' (W. Atlee Burpee Company)
5. Profusion 'Orange' (All-America Selections)
6. 'Raspberry Lemonade' (W. Atlee Burpee Company)
7. Profusion 'Double Deep Salmon' (William Hrycan)
8. 'Queen Red Lime' (W. Atlee Burpee Company)
9. Profusion 'Double Hot Cherry' (William Hrycan)
10. Benary's Giant 'Salmon Rose' (Floret – floretflowers.com)
11. Zahara 'Starlight Rose' (William Hrycan)



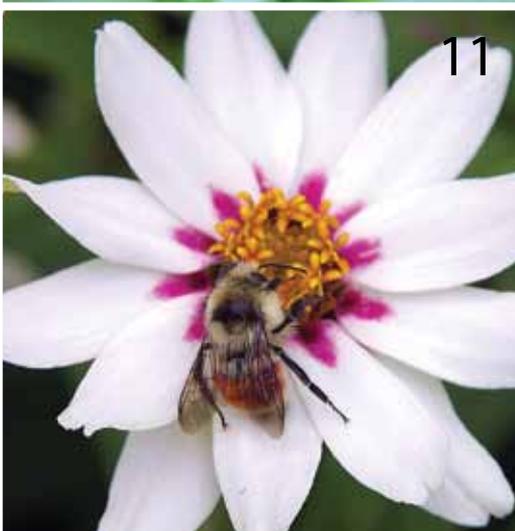
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Profusion have recently become available. These zinnias have won several awards from the All-America Selections judges over the years, including the Profusion 'Double Deep Salmon' and Profusion 'Double Hot Cherry' in 2013 and the Profusion 'Red' zinnia in 2017.

Breeding has resulted in unique zinnias that are breaking away from traditional flower colours and forms. 'Dancing Girls' produces double flowers that are pink around the outside, but fade to crisp white in the centre. 'Tequila Lime' flowers are similar in colour to 'Envy', but the flowers are more refined and uniform.

Another recent release is a zinnia series called 'Queen Rose Lime' (sometimes listed as 'Queen Red Lime'). The flowers are about six cm (2.5 in.) in diameter and usually perfectly formed double dahlia-flowered blooms.

The flowers are true chameleons as no two blooms appear to be exactly the same shade. Individual blooms have outer petals that are dusty pink or smoky burgundy, tapering to lime green centres. In some blooms, lime green predominates, while other blooms give the appearance of being almost totally dusky rose. The unusual blooms are very effective in flower arrangements.

So-called creeping zinnia is a popular container plant. It has a dwarf spreading growth habit and petite, bright yellow, star-shaped flowers that cover the plants all summer long, cascading over the container rim. The plant is heat and drought tolerant and very low maintenance as it "buries its own dead" (doesn't need deadheading). Creeping zinnia is not a true zinnia—it's officially named *Sanvitalia procumbens*, but because of its common name, a discussion of zinnias is not complete without mentioning it.

Whether showcased in flower borders, containers, fresh cut bouquets or dried floral arrangements, the bold, bright colours of zinnia are guaranteed to knock your socks off.

Albert Parsons, ODN, is a landscape consultant and author of Gardening in All Four Seasons, Volumes I and II. He is a frequent contributor to The Gardener.



- 12. 'Aztec Sunset' (Floret – floretflowers.com)
- 13. Oklahoma 'Salmon' (Floret – floretflowers.com)
- 14. 'Queen Red Lime' (Floret – floretflowers.com)
- 15. 'Up roar Rose' (Floret – floretflowers.com)