

Petunias are Super for Containers and Flower Beds

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Gardeners have been enjoying the cheerful, tubular flowers and soft scents of petunias for hundreds of years. Petunias are said to have originated in South America where the Maya and Inca believed their scent could ward off underworld spirits. They are members of the Solanaceae family, which includes peppers, tomatoes and tobacco. The name, petunia, is thought to be derived from the Aboriginal word ‘petum’ meaning ‘a tobacco that does not make a good smoke’. Anyone who has grown flowering tobacco could likely see the resemblance in the tubular flowers and sticky foliage of both.

There are hundreds of petunia cultivars that are classified into a half dozen or so types. In these categories, breeders have introduced a number of series, which are groups of plants with similar flowering and growth habits. Petunias come in a plethora of colors from white to almost black and with many shades of pinks, purples, reds, yellows and blues. Some have contrasting veins; others sport a central star. Frilly doubles and intriguing bicolors shout for attention.

I find the older heirloom varieties to be the most fragrant, but they do require more maintenance than the newer sorts. Grandifloras are a type of petunia that was developed in the 1950s and noted for their huge, sometimes 5-inch wide blooms. While the flowers are spectacular, plants get lanky and spindly by mid-summer unless they are regularly groomed and pinched. Grandiflora series include Ultra, Dream and Supermagic.

Multiflora types of petunias produce many more flowers than the grandifloras, but they are smaller in size. Plants, too, are smaller but they have strong stems and hold up better especially during rainy periods. Celebrity, Mirage and Primetime are some multiflora series.

Masses of 1 to 1 ½ inch blooms cover 8-inch tall milliflora petunias. These are hard working plants perfect for containers because of their small size and early blooms. They are also self-cleaning which means no deadheading is necessary.

Wave petunias were introduced in the 1990s with ‘Purple Wave’ quickly achieving notoriety for 6 to 8-inch tall plants with an amazing 4-foot spread. Shortly after its debut, gardeners were treated to Tidal Wave, a series with larger flowers and taller plants, Shock Wave with small, bold-colored blooms, and Easy Wave, an excellent spreading variety.

About 2006, supertunias started being offered by garden centers and nurseries. These vegetatively propagated new darlings created quite the splash for their floriferous, season long floral production, their brilliant colors and incredible weather resistance. Cultivars can be had with either a spreading or mounding habit. Plants are sterile so no dead heading is necessary. Series include Vista, Mini Vista, Trailing and Double. Supertunia Mini Vista ‘Pink Star’ is the 2021 Annual of the Year.

Regardless of which petunia you fancy, all cultivars do best in full sun with a well-drained, moderately fertile soil. For best container performance, use a soilless potting media. Petunias can bloom from late spring until cut down by heavy fall frosts but, in order to produce flowers over this long period of time, they need a continuous supply of nutrients and water. Prepare flower beds for petunias by incorporating limestone, fertilizer and organic matter as needed before planting. When rainfall is lacking, plan on a deep watering at least once a week. Plan on supplementing nutrient needs by fertilizing with a water-soluble fertilizer every other week or as directed on the package.

The one drawback of many petunia cultivars is that by mid-summer, one is looking at long stems with just a few flowers at the tips. This is a situation that can be avoided with regular maintenance. Whenever checking on your plants, carry along your clippers and pinch back any stems that are sparse and tired looking. Plan on removing spent flowers from the older varieties so energy is not directed to make seeds but to produce more blooms. If this is done routinely throughout the growing season and plants receive adequate amounts of nutrients and water, your petunias will reward you with gorgeous blossoms through to the fall.

This spring check out some of the gorgeous petunia cultivars available at your local garden center. Use them in window boxes or mixed containers or carpet your flower beds with one of the groundcover varieties. They’ll be a super addition to your landscape.

If you have questions about growing petunias or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.

A picture containing flower, outdoor, red, plant

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