



Zany for Zinnias

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

There are so many wonderful flowers, it is nearly impossible to come up with just one favorite but zinnias rank high on my list. Despite these soaring temperatures, my patch of zinnias is sending out dozens of colorful blooms. This is not surprising since they are mostly native to Mexico and parts of Central America.

They reached American shores via Europe. Spanish explorers brought *Zinnia peruviana*, a rangy plant with yellow and orange flowers, back to Europe in the 1500s. Dr. Gottfried Zinn of Germany first described it and so it was named for him.

The great Swedish scientist, Linnaeus, was presented with a Brazilian marigold in 1796, which was actually another species of zinnia, *Z. elegans*. It was from this species that most of our modern day zinnias were developed. Two years later, seeds of this species were offered for sale, but the American public wasn't interested. Thankfully the French were, and European breeders worked to develop double flowered zinnias by 1856 and expanded the color range as well.

Another zinnia species (*Z. haageana*) made its way directly from Mexico to the U.S. in the early 1860s. This dwarf Mexican zinnia sports blooms in earthy colors of gold, bronze, copper and burgundy and a cultivar 'Persian Carpet', still available today, was offered in 1876 by a Philadelphia seed house. Bodger Seeds is credited with spotting an unusually large-flowering and multi-petalled natural mutation of the common zinnia (*Z. elegans*) and 'California Giants' were introduced in the 1920s.

Since then, much breeding has been done by hybridizers from Luther Burbank to William Atlee Burpee and beyond. This has given us such an incredible range of zinnia choices. Pick from 6-inch 'Thumbelina' to almost 4-foot tall 'Benary Mix'. Flowers can be single, semi-double, double or crested. Cactus-flowered varieties have long petals that twist creating a unique, shaggy flower form and make great cut flowers.

Of the approximately 20 species of zinnias, only 3 are generally found in the commercial trade. They include two previously mentioned, the common and Mexican zinnia as well as narrow-leaf

zinnia (*Z. augustifolia*), a great choice for hanging baskets and containers. More recently crosses between the narrow-leaf and common zinnia have given rise to the 'Profusion' series, fantastic as bedding plants. One can find zinnias in almost every color except blue. Do try some of the blended color hybrids like the 'Swizzle', 'Queen' or 'Zinderella' series. This year, 'Queen Lime Orange' reigns supreme in my garden.

Aside from their cheerful, vibrant, non-stop blooms, the second best thing about zinnias is that they are so easy to grow. A packet of seeds can be had for about the cost of a cup of coffee. The pleasure you'll derive from them all summer long, however, outlasts any caffeine buzz.

Not only do zinnias bloom from summer to frost but they can be used throughout the landscape. Put a few rows in the vegetable garden for color and to attract butterflies and other pollinators. Use them to line a front walkway, set them as bedding plants to wow visitors, or pot up the shorter varieties for sunny window boxes. Zinnias work well among perennials, as container plants and make the perfect cut flower.

The key to growing show-stopping zinnias is sun, dead-heading and good air circulation. Pick a site that receives a minimum of 6 hours of direct sunlight each day. The soil should be well-drained, moderately fertile and have a pH in the mid 6's. Even first-time zinnia growers should try starting them from seed. In late spring, prepare your bed and after the danger of frost has passed (usually by mid to late May), sow zinnia seeds about ½ inch deep spacing seeds approximately 6 inches apart. The large seeds are easy to handle. Keep the seed bed moist and the seeds should have sprouted in less than a week.

If the seeds for some reason do not germinate, you still have plenty of time to pick up some transplants at your local garden center. If your plants receive adequate water when getting established, they will be better able to withstand some drought conditions. Like all plants, however, they will do best if they receive at least an inch of water per week.

Remove faded blooms as this will encourage branching and more blossoms. Zinnias are attractive to Japanese beetles. They can be knocked off into cans of water and dishsoap or I just squish them (with gloves on) in the cooler morning or evening hours. If the Japanese beetles have a white dot on their green thorax, leave them be. They have been parasitized by the Winsome fly and will soon be dead.

Powdery mildew is the other concern with zinnias. Keep plants well-spaced and try not to wet the foliage when watering. Disease resistant varieties are available including 'Purple Prince', the 'Profusion' series, and 'Forecast'.

Few things ring in the lazy, hazy days of summer like a carnival colored bouquet of zinnias. Don't leave them out in the garden. Bring them in where you can enjoy them – hopefully in air-conditioned comfort.

For questions about growing zinnias or on any other home or garden topic, feel free to call the UCONN Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at 877.486.6271, visit their web site at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.

