



Geraniums can brighten up any corner

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GREAT GARDENING

Geraniums galore

Geraniums are a delight for the not-so-green-fingered gardener.

Simple to grow, adaptable to various conditions, very low maintenance, and beautiful whether in bloom or not – they are the perfect addition to any garden or balcony.

Here in the Canary Islands they will flower through most seasons and will also keep going for many a year. They offer an attractive assortment of colours and shades, from white through to pink, mauves and red, and come in various shapes and sizes so can be used in several different positions.

Ground rules

A truly versatile plant, geraniums can be planted at any time of year, though midsum-

mer with its elevated temperatures is probably best avoided. Spring and autumn are ideal, however, so now is a great time to start planning for their arrival.

First of all you need to choose exactly where you would like your geranium to live. They make great houseplants as long as they have enough sunlight – without it they will be spindly, weak and no doubt refuse to bloom.

However, place them in a bright room or on a sunny window ledge, preferably a south facing one, and they will survive quite happily.

If planting outdoors, you will probably have to provide at least a little shade. Some varieties will tolerate our long hard days of strong sunshine dur-



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Pick up geraniums from garden centres or markets

ing summer, but most of them prefer a cooler spot for at least some of the day. There are even a few, such as *G. phaeum* and *G. nodosum*, which grow best in heavier shade.

Choosing their position can influence which variety is best

for your needs. Some geraniums are low-growing and spread easily, perfect for border edges, whilst others are taller and more upright and would be better placed in a mid-height area of a bed. There are even dwarf varieties which can be a good option for indoors.

As far as soil goes, once again this wonderful plant will be happy anywhere you put it – almost. They will grow in most soils but will not tolerate being waterlogged so ensure there is good drainage. Adding a little sand or grit to a heavy soil will help with this, and always allow the top portion of soil to dry out fully before watering. They will even manage in nutrient poor soil, but adding a small amount of compost will improve growth and general health.

Geraniums are seldom bothered by insects or diseases, though some may suffer mildew in humid conditions and

the ubiquitous whitefly can take a hold at times. Luckily, they are fast growers and if no other recourse is available they can be cut back to ground level and will usually sprout a fresh crop of healthy leaves within a very few weeks.

Bring on the blooms

There are three ways you can bag yourself a geranium: grow them from seed, take cuttings from an established plant, or buy one from a garden centre. This latter choice is obviously the quickest and simplest, just make sure you pick ones that look green and healthy, have plenty of leaves and shoots growing from the base, and that aren't spindly or have lots of brown patches on the leaves. If you have a handy friend who wouldn't mind donating a few cuttings, you will find that geraniums root quite easily and take well to being propagated in this way. Simply snip off a few new side shoots, between seven and ten centimetres in length, taking the cutting from just above a node.

Have some moistened multi-purpose or potting soil with a

wet, over the next few weeks, ensuring that it never dries out. If you want to grow from seed then you will need to prepare a spot that has plenty of light but doesn't receive full sun. A good growing medium for geraniums is one part soil, two parts peat and two parts perlite, though multi-purpose compost with a little sand or grit will do. Once the seeds have germinated and the first true set of leaves has appeared, the seedlings are ready to be transplanted into individual containers. Always handle seedlings by their leaves so as not to crush the delicate stems. A short time later, between 10 and 16 weeks, you will be able to enjoy your very first blooms. To encourage a continuous display, always 'deadhead' your plant by pinching or cutting off flowers once they die. If growth becomes too spindly, simply pinch out shoot tips to encourage side branch-

thumb-width hole already prepared, and place at least a third of the cutting into the soil, having removed most of the leaves except a few at the top. Gently push the soil back into place around the shoot and keep the growing medium moist, but not

ing and a bushier plant. Feed with a general purpose fertiliser throughout the growing season, and if you live in one of the colder areas, it can be a good idea to prune right back once foliage and stems slow their growth down. ■

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