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Pansies are perhaps the most popular of all the fall garden flowers grown in Georgia. Planted October through December, these hardy biennials provide a splash of color and warmth to an otherwise drab winter landscape. What's more, they will continue to bloom heavily through April and into May in middle Georgia.

Pansies are cool crops, doing best at temperatures of 60-70 degrees during the day and 40-50 degrees at night. They produce their best flowers in the spring when temperatures are mild, and then fade and are usually discarded when hot weather arrives.

Pansy colors are numerous, coming in pure blues, whites, and yellows, and variations of pastels, orange, gold, maroon, and even brown and black. They may be clear, streaked, or blotched. Flower size may vary from one to three inches in diameter, depending on culture.

Pansies are fairly versatile, too. They are good choices for mass plantings, planters, hanging baskets, window boxes, and borders. They can be placed in beds and foundation plantings between other flowers and shrubs.

It is important to place pansies in full sun or partial shade, as too much shade reduces the flower size and numbers and makes the plants grow tall and spindly. Generally they should be spaced from 6 to 12 inches apart.

Pansies are best purchased as transplants at time of desired planting. It is difficult to start them from seeds in the summer with an eye toward a fall planting because the summer heat tends to make them grow tall and lanky rather than short and stocky. Plants purchased now will have come from small seedlings called plugs grown by professionals in greenhouses and transplanted into larger containers for sale.

Pansies appreciate fertile, well-drained soils and will not grow in heavy, compacted soils or in extremely sandy soils, no matter how well fertilized they are. One sure way to improve any soil for pansy production is by the addition of organic matter. Organic materials such as pine bark, peat moss, and leaf mold will improve moisture and nutrient-holding capacity, cause the soil to drain better, and enhance root growth. Place three or four inches of such material on the surface of the soil and work it in to a depth of 6 to 8 inches.

After planting pansy plants, apply a general purpose fertilizer such as 8-8-8 or 10-10-10. An average application rate is one level teaspoonful per square foot of pansy bed. Apply the fertilizer about a week after fall transplanting, once more in late fall or early winter, and again in March. Be careful not to add excessively high rates of nitrogen; it can cause plants to produce soft foliage and few flowers.

Other cultural practices that will encourage bigger, brighter flowers on sturdy plants are the application of about one inch of water per week during the growing season and the removal of old, spent flowers. These practices will extend the flowering period and help your pansy crop brighten up your home landscape, so that your pansies are the envy of the neighborhood.