

INTERNATIONAL CONTRIBUTOR

BRINGING THE
BEAUTY OF
NATURE'S LIVING
ART INTO YOUR

Home!
by ERIN BENZAKEIN
Floret Flowers

Fresh flowers for the house really are the ultimate luxury. All winter and early spring, I look forward to the abundant summer months when I can pick fistfuls of blooms and bring them in alongside fresh vegetables from the garden. If you have a little bit of time and sunny garden space, you too can be rewarded all summer long with bouquets to enjoy or give away.

Of all the plant groups, annuals are the simplest and quickest, and the most affordable that you can grow. Annuals are plants that you sow in early spring; they bloom mainly in summer, set seed, and die when the weather cools in autumn. Annuals are the workhorses of the garden and provide the bulk of our summer flowers here on the farm.

And of all the annual flowering plants you can grow in your cutting garden (or even the back of your

veggie patch), none are more productive than cosmos. They truly are a cut-and-come-again flower: the more you harvest them, the more they bloom. A single planting will produce buckets and buckets of airy, delicate, daisy-like blossoms for many months. You can arrange them on their own or weave them into mixed bouquets. The possibilities are endless.

Cosmos are incredibly easy to grow, making them perfect for beginning gardeners. Seeds can be started indoors to get a jumpstart on the season or you can sprinkle them directly outside. Either way, cosmos will bloom in just under three months from the date you sow them.

To start indoors, sow seeds 4 to 5 weeks before the last spring frost, and then plant seedlings into the garden once all danger of frost has passed. Be careful not to sow seed



too early, because seedlings will quickly outgrow their pots before the weather has warmed enough to put them out into the garden.

Alternately, you can sprinkle seeds in your garden once the danger of all frost has passed. In about a week, you'll see seedlings sprout up from the soil. Keep the young plants protected from slugs and snails as they are getting established since new growth is quite tender.

Plants get very bushy and prefer a little extra room to spread out, so space plants 12 to 18 inches apart. Once in the ground, cosmos will grow rapidly, so be sure to stake them early, while they are

still young. Cosmos also benefit from a technique called pinching, as this will encourage the already highly productive plants to branch even more vigorously. Here's how it's done: When plants are young, between 8 to 12 inches tall, take sharp pruners and snip the top 3 to 4 inches off of the plant, just above a set of leaves. This signals the plant to send up multiple stems from below where the cut was made, resulting in more abundant flower production as well as longer stem length.

I typically do two sowings, a month apart, and include some of my favorites listed here. This gives me a

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