



Four o'clock, which goes by several names, including Marvel of Peru and the botanical name *Mirabilis jalapa*, is a no-fail garden flower. Most gardeners treat the bushy plants as annuals, though they develop fleshy tubers in the south and come back year after year. They grow to a manageable 2 to 3 feet in height, and sport flowers in a fascinating variety of colors, including marbled bi-colors. The common name “four o'clock” came about because the flowers habitually open in the late afternoon, remaining open into the night. They are sweetly scented, and a favorite of hummingbirds.

Four o'clocks thrive in full sun, but will also tolerate some shade. Like many plants, they prefer fertile, well-drained soil, but are tolerant of a wide range of conditions. They flourish in the heat of summer.

1. Prepare. Loosen soil to a depth of 6 to 8 inches using a shovel or fork, and mix in some compost to improve the soil structure and drainage. Fertilize with a slow-release fertilizer. Rake the soil smooth, removing any large clumps and rocks.

2. Plant. Sow Four o'clock seeds directly in the garden in spring or early summer, about 4-6 inches apart; cover seeds lightly with soil and press gently.

3. Grow. Water the soil to keep it moist for a week or two, until seeds germinate. Once seedlings are a few inches tall, thin them by removing extra plants so the remaining ones are at least 1 foot apart. Pull weeds that sprout nearby, and apply organic mulch, such as bark chips, to control weeds and conserve soil moisture. Water during period of summer drought.

4. Enjoy. Four o'clocks begin flowering in mid- to late summer, and continue into fall. Enjoy the multicolored blooms, the fragrance, and the hummingbirds that the tubular flowers may attract in the evening.



AT A GLANCE



Exposure: Full sun to part shade

Planting time: after danger of frost.

Planting depth: 1/4 to 1/2 inch deep

Spacing in row: Sow 4 to 6 inches apart; thin to 12 to 18 inches apart.

Time to flower: 70 to 80 days from seed.