Overwinter annual plants and get ahead on spring color

With cooler weather on the way – hopefully sooner rather than later – gardeners can extend the life of their annual plants by moving them indoors. Many annuals, or bedding plants, will continue to grow if moved inside before being damaged by cold weather.

If you have pots of annuals, simply move them indoors. If the plants are in containers that are simply too big to move, take cuttings of your favorite species now and root them indoors. In the protective environment of your living room, or if you have a sunroom, an annual that bloomed over and over throughout the summer will continue to do so in the house.

Use plant cuttings to start annuals such as impatiens, coleus and geraniums. Within just a couple of weeks they’ll develop roots in vermiculite, sharp sand or perlite. Select cuttings up to 6 inches long, making the final cut just below a node where the leaves were attached. Strip the bottom leaves where the stem will be inserted into the rooting medium. It’s a good idea to dip the premoistened stem into a rooting powder.

In order to conserve energy during the rooting process, pinch off any flower buds that may be on the cutting. Once planted, maintain moisture and humidity by putting a clear plastic bag over the pot. It’s important for the leaves to not touch the plastic as this can cause them to rot. Check the cuttings daily and remove any rotting leaves.

Keeping the rooting medium moist is vital, but make sure it doesn’t get soggy because this can cause root rot. As the cuttings develop roots, keep the pot in an area of the room that is bright, but not in direct sunlight. The roots will develop in a couple of weeks. Once the roots are developed, plant in a 4- to 6-inch container and continue to keep them in a bright area of the room. If possible, place them near south or west facing windows.

When the potted plant is established, pinch off the stem tip because this will encourage growth of lateral branches that fill out the plant and cause it to flower more prolifically. Gardeners will need to trim back the plants periodically. With a good supply of plant food, new leaves will develop, and flowers will begin to form.

Sun-loving annuals such as marigolds and zinnias may not do as well indoors due to their need for a good supply of sunshine.

When spring rolls around, gardeners should have a great start on bedding plants to add color to the landscape.