Winter Annuals

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It seems a shame to be discussing winter annuals when our summer annuals such as zinnias, pentas, begonias, vinca and marigolds are looking so good and we can expect them to bloom all the way to Thanksgiving. Nevertheless, it is already the time when we can begin planting the winter blooming flowers such as snapdragons, stocks, dianthus, and calendula. Planted now in the end of September you can expect them to have a fall bloom period until January and then another bloom period in March and April.

To maximize bloom performance in your flower beds and cut flower garden you may have to be a bit ruthless and remove all or some of the summer flowers to put the winter annuals in place. That is especially true of the sun blooming flowers, wait on the begonias and penta in the shade for 5 or 6 more weeks.

Snapdragons are available in tall, medium and small selections. My favorites are the “Rocket” variety. “Rockets grow to 3 feet tall and offer yellow, white, pink, red, orange and violet blooms. Because of their height, however, they are also the hardest snapdragons to manage. Grow single plants in 3 gallon or larger containers supported by an aluminum tomato cage. In the garden plant rows against the fence for support or plant six or more rows together so they protect each other from the wind. I plant them 2 ft. apart in the garden. “Rockets” are very showy, make excellent cut flowers, and are utilized by hummingbirds as a nectar source.

The “Liberty” snapdragon is nearly as showy and at 18inches tall it is much easier to manage. Plant “Liberty” on 18 to 24 inch centers in drifts or rows in the garden. Use the “Snapshot” and other small (6 inches tall) selections planted close together in small containers or as borders in the garden.

The common stock variety available as transplants at area nurseries is “Harmony”. Its flowers are less intensely colored than snapdragons but are still very attractive as bedding plants or cut flowers, and they have a wonderful spicy fragrance. “Harmony” grows to about 18 inches tall. Plant it every foot in the garden and closer together to make showy fragrant containers for the sunny patio.

To grow some taller stocks for longer stem cut flowers, I ordered some seed of “Quartet” from the internet this year. The larger older varieties were less disciplined growers than the newer selections like “Harmony”

Dianthus is available in red, white, pink, lavender, and bi-colors. It resembles vinca and is the most drought tolerant of the winter annuals. Dianthus often will bloom into June if you trim back the flowers and crown in March. There are several size versions from which to pick. Use dianthus for hanging baskets and for massed plantings in the flower garden. It is not useful as a cut flower but is a favorite w butterfly nectar source.

For those of you who miss the warm weather once winter arrives, plant some calendulas. The 18 inch tall plants produce yellow and gold blooms that resemble thickly petaled sunflowers. Calendulas warm up the garden. They can also be used for cut flowers and attract the winter flying butterflies to the garden.

You may wonder why I have not mentioned pansies, viola, cyclamen, and primrose which are also wonderful winter blooming plants. They are sensitive to hot spells that sometimes occur in September and October so it is best to wait until early November to plant them. We will discuss them in an article next month.

Gardeners wanting more information on growing winter vegetables are invited to a free program at 6800 Dorothy Louise Dr near the Medical Center (Dreamhill Estates neighborhood) this morning (09-17-2016) at 10 am. I will join a nutritionist from the Health Center for the Program. She will discuss the health advantages of winter vegetables and I will discuss how to grow them.