**Winter Color**

**Calvin Finch Ph.D.**

**Horticulturist and Director**

**Texas A&M Water Conservation and Technology Center**

It is time to plant the annual flowers that prosper in the winter. Among those to consider are snapdragons, stocks, calendulas, dianthus and petunias.

Snapdragons are available in 3 basic sizes. My favorites are the rocket snaps. They grow to 3 feet tall and make a spectacular show in the garden or containers. Rockets come in red, white, yellow, rust, pink and blue-purple.

Rocket snapdragons are susceptible to wind damage, so plant them against a wall or fence, or in several rows so they can support each other. They work very well in a 3-5 gallon container supported by an aluminum tomato cage.

Snapdragons are also available in mid-sized and small versions. Use the 12-186 inch selections in borders or as a mass planting. The small selections of snapdragons grow from 4-6 inches tall. They work well in containers or as borders. The colors are the same as the rocket snapdragons, but they do not seem as intense to me.

Snapdragons do not have a fragrance but they make good cut flowers. Plant the larger snapdragons 18-24 inches apart in full sun. The mid-sized selections do well when planted 12-18 inches apart. The smallest snaps can be planted 6-8 inches apart.

Snapdragons usually have two distinct bloom periods. They bloom October through December, and then again in March through May. The mid-winter lull usually begins after a cold snap in early January.

Stocks grow to about 16 inches tall with pink, white, red and lavender flowers. The colors are more pastel colored and less intense than snapdragons. Stocks make a long-lasting cut flower that has a very pleasant fragrance. You can even enjoy the fragrance in the garden.

The last two years, stocks in my garden have only lasted from October through December. In years past, however, they have had a second bloom period to match snapdragons.

Calendulas have golden or yellow blooms. Calendulas warm up the winter garden with their daisy-like flowers and warm colors. They make good cut flowers and are a favorite nectar source for butterflies. Calendulas grow to 14 inches tall.

Dianthus also has a flat flower that attracts butterflies. Its blooms, however, are only quarter size and come in pink, lavender, red, white and bicolors.

There are several varieties of dianthus on the market. Most grow to about 12 inches tall. The plant has long, thin leaves and will form clumps to 12 or 14 inches in diameter.

Dianthus is the most drought tolerant of the cool-weather annuals because of its aggressive root growth. It also has a longer bloom period. If you cut it back one or 2 inches in April, it will bloom throughout June. When you finally relegate the plant to the compost pile, the extensive root system is obvious. In fact, dianthus can be difficult to dump out of a container because of this tight root ball.

Use dianthus as a bedding plant or in containers. Most selections are not good for cut flowers.

Petunias are most useful when planted in August to serve as an autumn color source.

All of the varieties will bloom until the first strong cold spell in late December or early January. If you select one of the tough petunias such as Wave, Laura Bush, or VIP, they will often survive the winter to bloom again in March and through June.

Cabbage and ornamental kale do not produce a flower, but their silver or silver-red foliage can be very decorative to the garden. Use the plants in orderly measured plantings or as a border. Of all the winter annuals, they are the most uniform. Planted in neat rows, they resemble a military formation.

Ornamental kale has thinner and more frilly leaves than the cabbage.

Wait until late October or November to plant pansies, primula and cyclamen. They decline quickly if they are subjected to the typical warm spells we experience in early October. Use pansies in full or partial sun. Primula and cyclamen bloom in deep shade.

Pansies grow close to the ground, only reaching 8 inches tall. There are many varieties of pansies that are differentiated by flower size and bloom characteristics. Most varieties offer blue, yellow, brown, orange and white flowers.

Primulas are available in two distinct species. One species grows upright with light green foliage and pastel colored flowers to 14 inches tall. The most striking species has a pattern of growth like pansies, but with very intense colorful blooms of red, blue, yellow, white, pink and purple.

Prepare the garden for cool weather annuals by incorporating 2 inches of compost into the planting bed. Add one cup of slow-release or winterizer lawn fertilizer into every 50 square feet of bed, as well. Live oak leaves and other fine mulches work well to help keep the soil moist. Winter annuals need to be watered twice a week if there is no rain. Fertilize again every 4 weeks with the same cup (1 pound) of fertilizer, side dressed along 16 feet of row.