

Winter Annuals

Distribute 09-14-2017

The hot weather annuals will probably bloom well through Thanksgiving but the potential exists to start planting the cool-weather annuals. Snapdragons, stocks, ornamental kale, calendula, and dianthus can be planted now. Wait to plant pansies, cyclamen, sweet peas, and primula.

There are a number of snapdragon varieties from which to choose. They are a popular winter flower because of the intense color of the blooms and potential for cut flowers. Snapdragons planted now will have an autumn bloom period and then after a pause in January and early February, they will have another bloom period in the spring into May.

I believe the best variety for cut flowers is the "Rocket." They grow to 36 inches tall with very large bloom clusters in red, yellow, pink, white, orange, and violet. "Rocket" is getting more difficult to obtain from area nurseries though because it is a harder selection to germinate and is more unruly in the retail displays than the selections like "Liberty". "Rocket" is also top heavy with its tall cluster of blooms, which makes it more prone to be damaged by wind. It works best in massed plantings or against a fence (as long as it is still in full sun). One effective way to grow "Rocket" is in a large container such as a half whiskey barrel supported by an aluminum tomato cage.

"Liberty" grows to about 18 inches tall. It is a more disciplined performer than "Rocket" and less affected by wind and rain. It works very well when planted massed or in rows. It also works well for small cut flower bouquets. "Snapshot" is a selection that only grows to 6 inches tall. It works well as a border in the flower bed or containers.

Stocks are another winter annual to plant in the garden or containers. It has attractive flowers that are generally less intensely colored than snapdragons but have a very pleasant and potent fragrance. A bouquet of stocks looks good and smells wonderful. "Harmony" is the most common selection available in area nurseries. It grows to about 18 inches tall. Use stocks in rows in the cut flower garden or massed in a large container.

Ornamental kale and cabbage decorates the winter garden with its colorful foliage rather than with blooms. Some selections have a fringed look and all make a disciplined row or massed planting. The foliage can have a silver or reddish coloring. The plants will grow to 18 inches tall and nearly as wide.

If you want your winter flower garden to have a "warming effect," plant calendula. These cold weather annuals are available in gold or yellow. They resemble sunflowers. Calendulas are a favorite nectar source for the winter butterflies and are often included in the winter garden as a replacement for the zinnias in the summer garden. The modern selections are shorter than earlier varieties so the impact as a cut flower is less impressive but they still can be used.

Dianthus is another good butterfly nectar source for the winter garden. It is a bedding plant that works well in containers and flower beds. Dianthus has quarter size blooms in red, white, pink, and violet. Dianthus are the winter annual that lasts longest into early summer.

Later in the winter pansies, cyclamen, sweet peas, and primula can be planted. They are all more sensitive to warm spells that may occur in September and October.

Several weeks ago I wrote about the special value of sunflowers in the summer landscape. I suggested that they be planted by seeds from packets available at your favorite nursery or from seeds collected from wild beds at sites such as the Mitchell Lake Audubon Center. My friends at the Center reminded me that as desirable as it is to spread sunflower plantings for butterflies, it is not desirable or allowed to collect seeds from plants growing on the Center. I agree, sunflowers maybe common but the Center is also home to more rare plants and all must be protected.