

Winter Annuals

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I find this time of the year challenging because I am faced with a decision in my flower garden. Do I remove the zinnias to plant snapdragons? If you don't plant the large size snapdragons like Rocket and Sonnet this month, you will miss out on a major part of the fall bloom period. If they are planted in October, you will enjoy the long fall bloom period. The fall snapdragon blooms usually last into January when cold weather puts them into a bloomless period until late February or early March.

The problem is that to make space for the fall snapdragons, the late crop of zinnias must be removed. That would be tough enough to accomplish if you only were considering the cut flowers that you would miss. Do you like zinnias better than snapdragons? Zinnias generally bloom at least until mid-December when freezing temperatures arrive. If you remove them now, not only do you miss out on 2 months more of zinnias for cut flowers, the blooming hot weather annuals are one of the premier nectar sources for butterflies, hummingbirds and other pollinators. Snapdragons may match zinnias for cut flower value, but they are not in the same league as a nectar source!

One option is to keep zinnias in place as long as they are in top form but go ahead and plant winter annuals in all other available spaces in the garden. Prepare the planting areas by adding 2 inches of compost and 10 cups of slow-release lawn fertilizer (such as 19-5-9) per 100 sq. ft. of bed.

In addition to snapdragons, stocks can be planted in October. Stocks grow to about 16 inches tall and produce pastel colored blooms with a very pleasant fragrance. They make excellent cut flowers.

Calendulas do not offer a fragrance, but they also can be used for cutting flowers. The blooms are orange or yellow and resemble a compact sunflower. Calendulas warm-up a winter garden and provide nectar for the winter flying butterflies.

Dianthus are a cool weather version of vinca in terms of flower appearance. Deer, however, will eat the dianthus. Of all the winter annuals, dianthus lasts the longest into the summer. If they are trimmed back in February, you can expect them to bloom into June. Butterflies also use dianthus as a nectar source.

Ornamental kale and cabbage don't rely on flowers to provide color for the winter landscape, but they are useful for plantings where a disciplined orderly impression is the goal. The plants are available in several shades of green, silver, and maroon. All the winter annuals do best when they receive regular fertilization, but it is especially important for ornamental kale and cabbage. Sidedress each 8 ft. of row with a cup of "winterizer" lawn fertilizer every 4 weeks. Protect kale and cabbage from cabbage loopers by having a Bt spray ready as soon as any damage is spotted.

Sweet peas are another winter annual that has a wonderful fragrance and makes an excellent cut flower. The blooms can be red, pink, white, yellow, purple, and salmon. Grow sweet peas from seed that have been soaked in water overnight. They need a trellis for support. Large tomato cages work well.

Pansies, primula, and cyclamen are other outstanding winter annuals. Wait until November to plant them because they react negatively to the frequent hot spells that occur in October.