

The Best Winter Annuals

Distribute 10-23-2019

As far as I know the City of San Antonio Climate Change Plan did not address the impact that warm weather has on pansies and cyclamen, maybe it should have! We wait to plant the two spectacular winter annuals until November because they don't react well to warm spells in the early autumn. Now in the midst of global warming maybe November will be too hot for them to prosper? Pending any new data, we will assume that for at least one more year the two premiere cool weather annuals will do well if planted in November. That means it is time!

Pansies are available in two main bloom types, clear and monkey-faced plus several different bloom sizes varying from half dollar to two times silver dollar size. The plants do best in full sun where they produce mounds about 8 inches tall and a foot in diameter. The flowers are available in blue, yellow white, purple, orange, and brown. The monkey faced versions have a dark colored flower center.

Pansies are planted later in the winter than snapdragons and stocks, but they don't usually stop blooming in January like the other winter annuals.

Violas and Johnny-jump-ups are close cousins of pansies. Their main difference is bloom size. The "cousins" have smaller blooms and bushier plants. Violas produce quarter size flowers and Johnny-jump-ups are usually nickel-size.

All the pansy relatives are used in containers in addition to massed plantings of a single or mixed colors.

Cyclamen have intense bloom color and foliage with patterns of silver and green that makes them look like they have been produced by a team of artists rather than grown. The flower colors are pink, red, white, lilac, purple, and lavender. For years cyclamen have been used as a floral gift to perk up hospitalized friends and now they are an unmatched winter blooming plant for the shade.

Plant cyclamen massed or in orderly rows in the flower bed. They also work well in containers as a welcoming display to your front door. Use single colors or two colors such as red and white together. I plant them on 18-inch centers in the flower bed.

Cyclamen are spectacular blooming plants, but they are expensive, usually \$6 for a transplant in a quart container, and the blooms are relatively cold sensitive. The foliage does not freeze but be ready to cover the blooming cyclamen with a layer of agricultural fiber if temperatures of 30 degrees or less are forecast.

There is another shade blooming winter annual to consider along with cyclamen, primula. Primula has a growth and bloom habit that resembles pansy except that the leaves are Kelly green and crinkly, and the blooms look like they were colored with show paint. The blooms have intense waxy coloring just like a clown's makeup at the circus. Primula offer a more intensely hued version of all the same colors as pansy blooms.

Primula is most often used in containers. It is a favorite slug and snail food so protect the plants by spreading slug and snail bait around the plants every 2 weeks.

If you are planting pansies, violas, Johnny-jump-ups, cyclamen or primula in containers use potting soil and fertilize with Osmocote. In raised bed gardens or borders enrich the soil with 2 inches of compost

and 5 cups of slow release lawn fertilizer such as 19-5-9 or “winterizer” such as 18-6-12 to prepare the planting site.

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