

Petunias for the Transition

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Over the course of the year the two main attractions in my flower garden are the cool weather annuals led by snapdragons and the hot weather blooming annuals dominated by the zinnias. There are some other showy blooms however that prosper especially well in the period of cool, moderate temperatures in between snapdragons and zinnias.

If you have forgotten about these “seasonal fillers” all you have to do is visit your favorite retail nursery. Geraniums and petunias are in that category and they are dominating the display with their showy blooms.

The best way to use geraniums is in containers placed in full sun from now until late May. At that time when the temperatures increase, move the geraniums into less and less sun until they have a relatively cool spot in morning sun for the summer. They won't be as showy as they are now but by keeping them in a reduced sun situation and well-watered, they will survive until fall when the conditions cool down enough for them to restore their bloom performance again.

There is one geranium variety, Fantasia, that has superior hot weather tolerance. Seek out Fantasia geraniums (especially Strawberry Sizzle and Violet). They cope especially well with the heat and do a good job of maintaining their bloom in the summer. Add to the attractiveness of your geranium display by using decorative containers with a theme such as Spanish courtyard or a favorite single or mix of ceramic colors. The nursery where you find the showy geraniums will also offer decorative containers, potting soil and Osmocote fertilizer to set them up in more elaborate displays.

The reseeding Laura Bush petunia is another interesting plant in the “seasonal filler” category to consider. Its claim to fame is that once it has grown and gone to seed in your landscape, it will be back every spring and fall. It is a vigorous spreading petunia with violet or pink blooms that has relatively good heat tolerance. Some Laura Bush transplants can be found at area nurseries but one of the easiest ways to grow them is with seed. Wildseed Farms on the internet is a reliable source of the seed. If you are patient, seek out some Laura Bush seed from the closest neighbor with them growing in their landscape. If you have allowed them to reseed in your landscape, they are just starting to bloom now. The plants do not overrun the landscape like larkspurs, but they will find lots of corners of raised beds and even containers in which to germinate and bloom.

Wave petunias are one of my favorite petunias for use in our area and the plant evaluators at Texas A&M AgriLife and Texas Tech have went even further by designating some selections as Texas Superstars, indicating that not only are the plants beautiful but that they are easy to grow both for gardeners and the wholesale nursery trade statewide. The latest selection to be designated as a Texas Superstar is the Tidal Wave Red Velour Spreading petunia.

In addition to the intense red flowers that cover the spreading dark green foliage, the Superstar evaluators emphasize the selection's toughness and heat tolerance. It can be used in hanging baskets, containers and garden beds. It is reported that Red Velour does best in full sun with adequate water, and fertilization. It even responds to shearing. Look for transplants at your favorite nursery.