

More Winter Color Choices

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Last week we discussed using cyclamen for a spectacular blooming plant for the deep shade this winter. Another flower that rates almost as high for blooms in the shade is primrose, also called primula. There are many versions of primula. The showiest variety (*vulgaris*) grows as tall and wide as a pansy and in fact the flower is shaped like a pansy bloom. The primula is different from the pansy in the intensity of bloom colors. Primula blooms include red, yellow, blue, pink, white, purple, and orange and all of the colors look like the waxy show paint that decorates the faces of clowns at the circus or ceramic statues from the gift shoppe. In addition to the intense colored blooms, the leaves are crinkly Kelly green and very decorative.

There is an upright version of primrose (*obconica*) that grows 14 inches tall. The flowers of the *obconica* version are generally available in blue, white, and pink with the flowers displayed above a light green foliage. This version of primula is effective to use to fill a bed or container in the shade.

All primulas are favorite food for slugs and snails. They seem to access any unprotected primulas even in containers. To protect primrose and other low growing plants apply a dose of slug and snail bait every 2 weeks. In my experience primula is not overly sensitive to cold. I cover cyclamen with a layer of insulate when the temperatures are forecast to fall below 30 degrees. but would allow primrose an extra 2 degrees before covering the bed.

Another special flower selection for the winter is stock. There are several selections on the market at San Antonio retail nurseries. The most common selection at the nursery grows to 14 inches tall and offers blooms in red, purple, white, and pink. The flowers in any mixture include both doubles and singles. The flowers are attractive and make good cut flowers because of the bright pastel colored blooms and the potent and pleasant fragrance. Grow stocks in full sun. The butterflies will use your stocks as a nectar source.

We cannot be sure yet, but with climate change it may be getting easier to grow sweet peas. Growing more sweet peas is a desirable goal because the beautiful flower species makes a great addition to the winter garden and for bouquets. The flowers are colorful and fragrant. They last well as part of an inside bouquet.

Purchase a packet of seeds from your favorite nursery, soak them overnight and then plant the seed a half inch deep in garden soil enriched with slow-release lawn fertilizer (5 cups for every 50 sq. ft. of bed). Sweet peas are vines so plant the seed in front of a trellis. Large (5ft.) tomato cages make good support for the vines. Sweet peas grow best in full sun in soil enriched with 2 inches of compost.

As regards to "climate change" my sweet peas have been easier to grow over the last few years and I am crediting the warmer weather. I am not having to use the excuse that the sweet peas are sensitive to weather that is too cold and weather that is too warm. For sweet peas at least the weather has appeared to have been perfect!

Pansies are an all-star winter flower but today let us discuss violas and johnny-jump-ups, two small, flowered cousins of the pansy. The great thing about violas and johnny-jump-ups is that they prosper

when planted in small containers in full sun. They are available in as many color variations as pansies and they stay in constant bloom from the day they are planted until into May when the warmer temps arrive. Your snapdragons and stocks will usually have a bloom pause in January after the first serious freeze, but it will not bother the pansy family flowers.