

## Cool Weather Annuals

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Consistent with cooler temperatures finally arriving, it is time to plant some of the cool weather annuals. Consider snapdragons, petunias, stocks, dianthus, calendula, alyssum, and ornamental kale.

Prepare the planting area by incorporating 2 inches of compost and 10 cups of slow release lawn fertilizer such as 19-5-9 into every 100 sq. ft of flower bed. For containers fertilize with Osmocote and /or soluble fertilizer such as Miracle Gro or Peters.

Grow snapdragons in full sun. They are available with red, yellow, pink, white, orange, and lavender blooms. Select from small, medium and tall selections. The small varieties grow to 6 inches tall and work well in containers, either as a border for a larger central plant, or in smaller containers as the single plant. Medium size selections (8-12 inches tall) also work well in containers or they can be used as a border in the flower bed. My favorite selections, however, are the large snapdragon varieties. The 24 inch "Sonnet" does well when planted in rows in the cut flower garden. Another selection, "Rocket" grows to 3 feet tall. The tall height is good and bad. It means the "Rocket" can produce very large blooms for cut flowers and it is very decorative as the planting in rows or in the background of flower beds. Another excellent planting option is in a large container where a single "Rocket" is supported by an aluminum tomato cage. The tomato cage addresses the problem that the tall "Rockets" have of being top-heavy and prone to wind damage.

Snapdragons usually have two bloom periods. Planted now and if the weather stays reasonable, they will bloom from November until January when the serious cold weather arrives. They take a break until March and then resume blooming until mid-May. This scenario, however, is disrupted if it stays too warm in early winter or if we are blessed with a record cold spell in November like last year.

Petunias can be planted now as transplants or even by seed if you obtain the 'Laura Bush' selection. Their blooming and blooming pattern resemble that of the snapdragon. One difference is that if you obtain transplants from your favorite nursery or obtain seed from an internet supplier such as Wild Seed Farms, the "Laura Bush" petunias will probably reseed themselves and become a permanent part of your flower beds just like larkspurs.

Petunias don't make a good cut flower source, but stocks do. The plants produce red, white, pink and lavender blooms plus a very pleasant fragrance to make desirable bouquets. The blooms are also attractive in the garden and are a popular nectar source for pollinators. Plant stock in rows or massed like snapdragons.

Alyssum is also a cool weather annual that is very fragrant and attractive to butterflies and bees as a nectar source. The plants are available with white or violet flowers. Alyssum are not usually used as cut flowers, but they make attractive mounds of bloom in the flower bed or containers. Even though they are a cool weather annual, if you select the Texas Superstar "White Stream Lobelaria" selection it will survive the winter and bloom far into the summer. Alyssum is effective planted as a border plant or as a specimen.

Dianthus is another winter annual that keeps blooming into the summer. To extend the bloom prune back the plant by several inches in late March and it will produce blooms into June. Dianthus is available in red, white, pink, and violet. Butterflies that fly in the winter will use dianthus as a nectar source.

Calendula is available with yellow or gold flowers. It is a short lush plant that resembles a daisy or sunflower and seems to warm up the winter garden. Like sunflowers, calendula blooms are a favorite nectar plant for butterflies. They also produce good blooms for cut flowers.

Ornamental kale and cabbage do not produce any blooms, but the foliage of the plants is decorative. They work well for a disciplined border for the garden or a massed planting that produces an attractive texture. To achieve the desired impact with the ornamental kale and cabbage they need to be planted now, early in the season and fertilized well, just like the cabbage related crops in the vegetable garden.

Pansies, cyclamen, sweet peas, and primula are other beautiful plants for winter color, but wait to plant them until next month.