**Something Different for Winter Color**

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In weeks past, we have discussed a long list of winter-blooming plants, including snapdragons, stocks, calendula, dianthus, ornamental kale, pansies and cyclamen. All are very popular and easy to grow in the San Antonio area. If you want to try something different and more difficult to grow, consider primula, sweet peas, tulips, paper whites and daffodils.

Primulas are also call primrose by some gardeners. In the San Antonio market, there are usually two selections available: “obconica” and “polyanthus.” The “obconica” have pastel-colored pink, blue, purple and white blooms that emerge to about 16 inches above the soft green, attractive foliage.

The “polyanthus” have a very different growth habit and appearance. They grow low like pansies and have flat pansy-shaped blooms. No one will mistake them for pansies, however. The foliage is Kelley green with a thick, crinkly texture. The blooms are very bright . They are blue, red, pink, yellow, orange and white. The colors remind me of the colors of show paint, like the kind that clowns wear at the circus.

Grow primulas in the shade. They do well in deep shade. Containers or beds near the front door or on a shady patio are an ideal way to take advantage of the small size, shade tolerance and spectacular colors.

Primulas are a favorite food source for pill bugs, snails and slugs, so some kind of control is necessary from day one. Beer traps and baits work well.

Sweet peas rate very high as a cut flower. The colors are intense and the fragrance is potent and pleasant. They also last a long time after being cut. Sweet peas are available in red, blue, purple, violet, pink, yellow and white. They are grown by seed and are available as bush selections, but most usually are grown as a vine on a trellis. I like to grow them on the tomato cages in the garden after the fall tomatoes are harvested.

As readers may suspect, there are some sweet pea characteristics that detract from their use in the winter garden. Sweet peas are sensitive to both cold weather and to hot weather. They do very well when temperatures stay below 70oF and never fall below freezing! Temperatures between 50oF and 60oF seem perfect.

In San Antonio, sweet pea admirers wish for mild winters. They often resort to reseeding every month with the hope that the earliest November planting will germinate and survive until June. Most years, the February planting survives and there is a short bloom period until the plants decline in the heat.

Sweet peas are also very sensitive to soil moisture. Mulch over the root system and provide irrigation every two days if it is warm and dry.

It is time to get your favorite winter annuals in containers and the garden. We should be past the hot spells that reduce the life and blooms of pansies and cyclamen. Tulips can be treated as an annual flower for early spring bloom in this area. To work, however, you need to purchase “pre-chilled” bulbs. Plant them on or about January 1for a short, but showy, bloom provided in March. The bloom period length will be determined by the springtime temperature and winds. It may be as short as one week if it is hot or as long as a month if it is cool and calm.

If you want the nasturtium, daffodils and paper whites to bloom in late winter and early spring, you need to plant them now. Any paper white selection will naturalize and bloom every year in San Antonio. Find the bulbs at your favorite nursery. Plant them in the flower and shrub borders for early color or in drifts in a shaded, well-drained lawn if you are willing to let the leaves stay intact until they brown naturally.

Not all daffodils will naturalize in our soil and climate conditions. The favorite variety, King Alfred, will bloom for one year and then decline. Quail, Trevithian, Grand Monarque, Fortune, Carlton, and Golden Sceptre will naturalize.

Nasturtium have orange- or yellow-colored honeysuckle-like flowers that grow on plants with circular, light green blooms. They are often described as an old-fashioned flower because of the spreading growth habit.

Butterflies and hummingbirds like nasturtium. Transplants are sometimes available, but they are easy to grow from seed. Plant them as individual specimens or en masse in the full sun. They also make a good hanging-basket plant.