**Weekly Express-News Article**

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**Premiere Winter Annuals**

If you have never planted pansies, cyclamen, primula, or sweet peas for winter blooms, consider it this winter.

Pansies seem to be the most cold tolerant of our winter annuals. They are a low growing plant that works well in massed plantings of a single or mixed colors. They can also be grown in containers.

There are two main flower types, the monkey faced and clear faced. Monkey faced pansies have a dark center blotch that is surrounded by the other color. There is a wide choice of colors including purple, blue, yellow, white, orange, and brown. Some selections have a fragrance.

Violas and Johnny jump ups are pansy cousins with smaller flowers that are often used as borders or in containers.

All pansies do best in full sun but will bloom well in six hours of sun. Expect a pansy plant to produce a constant bloom. They do not cycle or even experience a mid winter bloomless period like snapdragons or petunias. Protect pansies from pill bugs, slugs, and snails with slug and snail bait.

Cyclamen produce their blooms in deep shade in fact they do not last long in sun.

In addition to shade tolerance cyclamen offer one of the most attractive blooms of cool weather annuals. The blooms rise orchid like on stalks above the foliage. The colors are very intense in red, white, pink, and several shades of lavender. I have never heard anyone describe a cyclamen bloom as “washed out”.

Like pansies, cyclamen are covered with blooms all winter. They do not have as much cold tolerance as pansies but because they are planted in more sheltered locations, often close to buildings, they survive most winters. Even last winter the plants that were covered with a blanket or agricultural fabric retained their blooms.

Cyclamen foliage is worthy of bearing spectacular flowers. The dark green, four inch, waxy leaves are heart shaped and decorated with silver tracings.

Cyclamen sound perfect, don’t they! They do have one flaw, cyclamen are very expensive. At nearly $6 for a 3 ½ inch potted plant, not many of us can afford a massed planting. Use them in containers or small shaded gardens near the front door or patio.

Primulas are not quite in the league with cyclamen but it is worthy of planting to provide winter color in the shade.

One version grows low and small like pansies but has a Kelly green crinkly leaf and very bright waxy flowers that resemble crayola colors. The come in basic blue, red, yellow, purple, pink, white, and brown. There is nothing subtle about these blooms.

A second choice is more upright growing to 12 inches tall. Its leaves are soft green and the flowers are pastel colors. The plants remind me of stocks except that blue is the best color in this primula and there is no fragrance.

If there are any pill bugs, slugs, or snails within 100 feet of primulas, they will find them. Refresh the application of slug and snail bait every week.

Pansies, cyclamen, and primula are relatively easy to grow in our area. Add some compost and fertilizer to a prepared soil, place the transplants and enjoy the blooms. I have found sweet peas to be more of a challenge. It seems to be either too hot, or too cold.

Grow sweet peas with seed. They are available in a bush form but the prettiest flowers are produced on the vine form. Sweet peas are available in red, pink, purple, yellow, white, orange, and pastels. The colors remind me of snapdragons.

Sweet peas are special because they make a great cut flower in addition to being showy in the garden. The fragrance is different from that of stocks but it is in the same league.

A bouquet of sweet peas in the house or a trellis full of blooms in the garden are a pleasure to see and to smell.

You will probably have to replant sweet peas several times over the winter to obtain a strand that finally reaches maturity. If the seeds you plant in November do not germinate and begin climbing in 30 days, replant. February is the last month to plant.

Sweet peas need full sun and do best if the soil has been enriched with compost. They are not xeriscape plants and must be watered several times per week. Mulch over the root system is important.

A wire or cyclone fence works well as a trellis and so do tomato cages. A tomato cage placed in a five to ten gallon container makes a good display for sweet peas on the patio.

Deer seem to eat all of the winter annuals described in this article. They love pansies!