**Weekly Express-News Article**

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**Early Spring Color**

This is an interesting time of the year for blooming plants. There are deer proof bloomers and superior cut flowers that prosper in the cool weather in addition to container varieties such as geraniums and petunias.

Geraniums are at their best when the weather is mild. They do not fare well in freezing temperatures or hot temperatures. The nurseries are loaded with various sizes of geraniums in many color versions including red, pink, violet, and bicolors.

Place the container in a decorative pot positioned in full sun. As we proceed into the summer move it into more shade. By June 1 geraniums should only receive 2 or 3 hours of morning sun for best performance.

Don’t expect much bloom through the summer. The goal is to maintain as much foliage as possible so they can perk up and begin blooming again in the fall.

For the most heat tolerant geraniums seek out Fantasia series, specifically “Strawberry Sizzle” and “Violet.” Last year even Fantasia had trouble surviving, but some summers they will bloom from spring through fall.

If you planted snapdragons last autumn they should be reblooming now. If you keep them watered they should perform well through April. Apply a cup of slow release lawn fertilizer per 8 feet of row now to support the spring flush of blooms. Snapdragons are especially desirable because deer do not seem to eat them.

Two other deer proof flowers that are blooming now are paperwhites and cemetery iris. Paperwhites offer a clump of lush upright foliage covered by small white flowers to the winter landscape. They have a fragrance that is pleasant to some gardeners but is not my favorite smell. Despite the fragrance, paperwhites are a favorite indoor winter decoration because they can be forced to bloom on cue without soil and much care. Plant the forced bulbs outside in a sunny or partially sunny location for lifelong winter blooms.

The foliage of paperwhites declines and browns by late spring, cemetery iris foliage, however, is attractive year round. Blue or white orchid-like iris bloom emerges from the sword-like foliage anytime from December through March depending on the weather.

Both paperwhites and cemetery iris are very drought tolerant.

Cyclamen, pansies, and primula can also provide good color until May as long as they are kept watered and are protected from pests. Slugs and snails are the obvious pests to control. Apply a slug and snail bait around the bed every 3 weeks. The other major pest is weeds. These low growing cool weather beauties quickly become overrun by rescue grass, bedstraw, henbit, and chickweed.

All you can do is pull the weeds by hand once they are in the bed.

Larkspur are naturalized in some San Antonio area flower beds. They are growing very strongly now and will bloom in March. Naturalized larkspur can become a weed themselves if they are given free hand in the flower bed. Keep them removed from the pansies and even snapdragons by identifying a larkspur zone. I generally designate a few rows and thin out all the rest. Even 2 rows produce lots of seed for next year and make a show of white, pink, blue, and violet blooms that make good cut flowers and are favorites of hummingbirds and butterflies.

This weather is to petunias liking as well. If you planted Laura Bush, Wave, VIP or other tough petunias in the fall, they spent the winter growing roots and now are producing foliage and blooms. Petunias can also become overrun with weeds or larkspur so take the time to pull out all the undesirable plants in the petunia area. An application of slow release lawn fertilizer will also benefit petunias. If you can get the weeds in control and add the fertilizer the hardy petunias named above may bloom well into June.

Sweet peas should be growing strongly now as well. It is debatable whether a crop seeded now will beat the heat to bloom, but the plants already growing should be filling up your trellis. Mulch over the root system with live oak leaves and keep them watered for a short but memorable show of intensely colored fragrant blooms. Sweet peas are one of my favorite cut flowers.

Gladiolas are not blooming yet but it is a good time to plant them in the cut flower garden. With long stems of red, white, pink, violet, yellow, and numerous bicolor blooms they make a spectacular show in the garden or as a cut flower. Try a row this year.