Color into Fall? It’s a Snap!
By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

While rich autumnal hues signal the changing of the seasons, not all of us are quite prepared to give up summer’s bright and cheery colors. Those growing snapdragons in their gardens or containers, don’t have to. Snapdragons (*Antirrhinum majus*) are hardy annuals throughout most of Connecticut. This means plants can tolerate cool spring and fall temperatures, often shrugging off a light freeze and continuing to bloom until hit by a heavy frost. Plants may overwinter in sheltered areas where temperatures stay above 10°F.

Snapdragons are also old-fashioned annuals. Many of us, including myself, remember them in their parents’ or grandparents’ flower gardens. My grandmother used to let them seed themselves in amongst her prize roses and the curiously shaped flowers and delightful colors caught the eyes of many visitors, including her grandchildren.

Native to the Mediterranean region and parts of North Africa and the Middle East, snapdragons have been hybridized over the years and come in a wealth of colors from strong solids to pastels as well as bicolored varieties. Plants are relatively disease and insect free and even deer and rabbits do not eat them in my garden. Sometimes there is some tarnish plant bug damage but in a large planting of snapdragons, it is usually minor.

Not only is the spectrum of colors huge but plants can be found in sizes ranging from 6 inches to 3 feet in height to many gardeners’ delight. Taller varieties like ‘Rocket’ and ‘Madame Butterfly’ are excellent as mid or back of the border plants, and also make magnificent cut flowers. Do note that they should be staked so strong winds and rain do not topple them over.

Medium to intermediate height plants look good in flowerbeds or amongst vegetables where they lure hummingbirds and certain bee species with their pollen and nectar. The ‘Sonnet’ series has been a popular selection coming in a range of colors. Well-branched plants flower early and over a long season.

Many are drawn to the dwarf and trailing varieties of snapdragons mostly because they are colorful and so darn cute in containers and window boxes. Because they are in such demand, a number of dwarf snapdragons are available in 4 or 6 packs come spring. ‘Floral Showers’, ‘Candy Tops’ and ‘Snapshot’ might be available in a garden center near you next year. Do consider using dwarf snapdragons as a bedding plant for a riot of color from late spring through heavy frost.
Dwarf snapdragon varieties are also great in containers. For window boxes and hanging baskets, look for some trailing types. ‘Candy Showers’ is one of the first trailing snapdragons that can be grown from seed and comes in a vast array of colors. The ‘Twinny’ series, while not as trailing, is covered with double blossoms in many colors that lean and spill over containers.

All snapdragons prefer full sun, a well-drained, fertile soil with a pH in the mid 6’s. Plants will still flower in partial shade although not as vigorously. Deadhead or remove spent blossoms for continuous bloom. Also, keep plants well-watered and fertilized regularly. As the season draws to a close, leave some seed heads on to encourage self-seeding. Keep in mind that seeds need to come in contact with bare, mineral soil to germinate so do not expect self-seeding to occur in heavily mulched beds.

Despite their many favorable qualities, the selection of snapdragon varieties in garden centers is limited with more dwarf and trailing varieties being sold in recent years. This still leaves gardeners with a myriad of choices but plants will have to be grown from seed. Starting plants from seed is not as daunting as it may sound.

Check out offerings in seed catalogs and order snapdragon seeds early, not only for best choices but also because they take a while to germinate and reach a transplantable size. Seeds are best started in a sterile seed-starting mix in February. Germination may take from 7 to 18 days depending on temperature and moisture conditions. 65°F is an optimal germination temperature. Do not cover seeds as they require light for germination. Place seed packs or flats under fluorescent lights for about 16 to 18 hours per day.

Once seeds germinate and the first set of true leaves form, thin plants to one per cell or transplant into 2-inch pots. Plants should continue to receive 16 to 18 hours of light each day but keep temperatures in the 60s. Fertilizer with a dilute all-purpose chemical or organic fertilizer once each week. Once the weather settles down, harden off plants by exposing them to longer periods of outdoor sunlight and cool temperatures before transplanting into the garden.

Seeds can also be sown outdoors in the fall in bare mineral soil in a prepared seedbed. Germination will be much less than what one would expect indoors under lights but perhaps one-tenth of the seeds scattered over a slightly scuffed garden bed soil will germinate if the winter is mild. Higher germination will occur if seeded in early spring. Lightly scratch the soil and sow seeds. Press into the soil but do not cover. Typically, enough new seedlings germinate each year from previously established plantings to keep a moderately sized snapdragon planting going. I have not purchased new yellow medium sized snapdragon plants in over a decade.

Try snapdragons for their color and versatility. For questions about growing and starting snapdragons or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.