



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

“I bought all these snapdragons for Mother’s Day, and now they look terrible!”

Snapdragons are cool season annuals here. They don’t bloom through the summer. We usually remove them by the end of June.

“Well, I feel like I wasted my money. You should write a column about when to plant flowers in this area.”

Happy to oblige.

As to snapdragons: the very best time to plant them is early fall. That gives each plant time to grow and develop low basal shoots that bloom in winter and spring. They continue blooming into early summer, but peak bloom here is late spring. You can plant in late winter (January – February) and get good blooms on those as well, though not as many flower spikes.

Snaps purchased on Mother’s Day were at their peak of bloom and destined to decline from that point forward. Ok to plant for an event or short display, but perhaps not the best use of your money.

First, some definitions.

- annual: a plant which grows, flowers, seeds, and dies in a single season. Marigolds and sunflowers are true annuals.
- half-hardy annual or “tender perennial usually grown as annual”: a plant which we grow for its immediate blooms, which dies when weather gets too cold. Impatiens and begonias are tropical plants which we grow for their bloom until they are killed by frost. We have similar flowers that tolerate frost but not heat (snapdragons!).
- biennial: a plant which grows one season, then flowers the next and then dies. Usually this involves a ‘vernalization’ process of overwintering, then increasing day length. Examples: foxgloves, hollyhocks.
- perennial: a flowering plant which continues to grow and bloom for two or more seasons. Example: chrysanthemum.

These terms are defined by how we use the plant, and the climate. Many plants that we grow as perennials are grown as annuals in colder climates; e.g., lantana and verbena. Some that we grow as annuals can be perennial in Southern California, such as petunias and Vinca rosea. It’s not a firm definition for each plant everywhere. Growers are often marketing to the whole country, so the label on the pot may not be your best guide.

Our seasons of planting and bloom.

Just as we have warm-season and cool-season vegetables here, we also have two full and distinct seasons for growing flowers. You can have flowers year-around by choosing the right plants for each season. It’s disappointing that your snapdragons only gave you a few weeks of bloom, but the good news is that in this region we’re always on the cusp of another planting season. Right now, for example, you can start seeds of snapdragons for next winter’s bloom!

How long do they bloom?



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Typically for two to four months. Some require “deadheading” (one of my favorite garden terms; this just means snipping or pinching off spent blossoms), or they’ll stop blooming. Others cheerfully flower until the temperatures get too cold or too hot and they just decline or die.

Some can actually be planted any time of year for immediate bloom, and may continue well past the typical defined seasons. I call these transitional annuals.

- Sweet alyssum blooms any time, and reseeds all over your yard. Great for attracting beneficial insects.
- Borage, usually sold as an herb, can be found flowering in the garden any time of year. Smells like cucumber, draws bees, and reseeds freely.
- Chinese pinks (*Dianthus chinensis*) bloom in every season. Hummingbirds love them.
- Lobelia is planted for summer, but often blooms well into winter here. One of the few true blue flowers.
- Paludosum daisy is planted for winter and spring bloom, but the bright white daisies can look good even in summer.

Key planting times for seasonal flowers:

Early fall, early spring, early summer are the times for planting out seeds or young seedlings. Early winter, late spring, and mid-summer are the time to put in plants already in bloom for quick spots of color.

September - October: first plantings of cool-season annuals.

- calendulas
- pansies, violas, Johnny Jump-ups
- snapdragons
- stock
- sweet peas
- seedlings of biennials for bloom next summer, such as Gloriosa daisy
- seeds of California poppies, larkspur, and nigella for bloom next spring.

November-December: plant the mid-winter flowers that detest heat.

- cyclamen
- nemesia
- primroses
- schizanthus

Some are not technically annuals. Cyclamen are bulbs that go dormant in summer. New forms of Nemesia, such as Blue Bird variety, tolerate heat. Primroses look so shabby in hot weather that we just pull them, but they are perennials and can persist to resume blooming in fall. You’ve probably never heard of Schizanthus, aka poor man’s orchid. Try it this winter!

February - March: last planting of cool-season flowers for more spring blooms, and early plantings of the transitional annuals.

April – May: main planting season for summer flowers.



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- begonias
- cockscomb (Celosia)
- impatiens (see pest notes below)
- marigolds
- petunias and calibrachoas (see pest notes)
- scarlet sage (Salvia splendens)
- sunflowers; continue successive plantings through July

May – mid-summer: plant the heat lovers. These sulk if planted in cool soil, and thrive on hot summer days.

- asters
- cosmos
- moss rose (portulaca)
- verbena (also comes in perennial forms)
- vinca rosea, aka Madagascar periwinkle
- zinnias

What about pests and diseases?

Impatiens Downy Mildew.

In 2004 this disease was found damaging plantings in the UK, and then in California, Tennessee, and New York in 2004. Between 2011 and 2013 it became widespread in the US, and now has been reported everywhere impatiens are grown. I have had reports from the Sacramento area.

The best guess is that the disease was spread through greenhouse production. The modern bedding plant industry consists of large growers who sell started 'plug' plants to wholesale growers, who then grow them on for retailers. That little flower you're planting likely started its life many hundreds of miles away. The disease doesn't have visible symptoms in the early stage, so it could spread widely without detection.

This isn't a minor disease. It wipes out the whole bed (the plants appear to just melt away) and lingers in the soil for 2 – 3 years to re-infect new plantings. Because of the rapid spread and publicity, retailers and growers shied away from impatiens.

Given that they are, or were, America's #1 bedding plant, this had a big impact on the horticulture industry. Breeders moved quickly to cross *Impatiens walleriana* with resistant species, so replacements may be in the trade soon. Until then I suggest you look for alternative flowers for the shade. Fibrous begonias are one possibility. New Guinea impatiens (*I. hawkeri*) is resistant, but it is taller, prefers a bit more sun, and the plants are more expensive.

Marigolds

For a flower that has a mythology about repelling pests, it's amazing how many things like to eat marigolds. Earwigs and snails can decimate them in one evening unless you use organic baits and traps right when you plant them. Spider mites love marigolds, leading to a scruffy, dusty appearance on the leaves by mid-summer. Rinsing vigorously with water every few days can manage them effectively. Marigolds also need deadheading (removal of the spent blossoms before they set seed) in order to continue blooming well.



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Petunias and calibrachoas.

Popularity comes from the profuse bloom and the range of strong colors. The downside is they are caterpillar food from May through October. When weather warms, geranium budworm shows up and begins eating flower buds and petals. The plant stops blooming and the remaining blooms are full of holes. This pest has several generations over the summer, requiring that you spray every week or so to have uneaten flowers. There's an organic spray (anything containing Bt), but most people aren't willing to spray that often. The same caterpillar attacks your common garden geraniums.

So which are the easiest flowers to grow?

Here are my top ten carefree annuals for the Sacramento Valley.

1. borage (*Borago officinalis*)
2. California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*)
3. Cosmos (*Cosmos species*)
4. fibrous begonias (*Begonia semperflorens*)
5. Floral Carpet dwarf snapdragon (*Antirrhinum majus*)
6. Johnny Jump-up (*Viola tricolor*)
7. Paludosum daisy (*Chrysanthemum paludosum*)
8. pinks (*Dianthus species*)
9. sunflowers (*Helianthus annuus*)
10. Sweet alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*)

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_annualplantingschedule/sunflower%20velvet%20queen.jpg

Summer glory: sunflowers bloom about 60 days after planting any time from April through July. True annuals, they bloom once, then seed and die. So keep planting them every few weeks for a succession of blooms. Shown here is Velvet Queen.

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_annualplantingschedule/ViolaPennyYellowJumpUp.jpg

Popular winter flowers: pansies, violas, and Johnny Jump-ups are all cousins in the genus *Viola*. Pansies are great for big flowers, violas are more profuse bloomers and hold up better in rainy weather. Johnny Jumpup, shown here, has smaller flowers in great profusion, and can tolerate both rain and heat better than the others.

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_annualplantingschedule/dianthustelstar.jpg

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_annualplantingschedule/Dianthus%20Telstar%20pink.jpg

All season: I have pictures of pinks (*Dianthus*) every month of the year. These carnation relatives bloom for many weeks from planting, any time of year.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_annualplantingschedule/SnapdragonTahitihotpink.jpg

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_annualplantingschedule/SnapdragonSonnetcarmine.jpg

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_annualplantingschedule/snapdragonyellow.jpg

Winter flowers: who doesn't love a snapdragon? For biggest bloom spikes and longest flowering, plant seedlings in early fall to let them develop through the winter. If you plant in spring, you'll get fewer spikes, but they'll still give flowers almost into summer.

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_annualplantingschedule/marigold.jpg

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_annualplantingschedule/marigoldagain.jpg

Summer flowers: marigolds are popular for the bright flowers in orange, red, and yellow. Be aware that they are also popular with snails and earwigs! Use some organic bait or traps when you plant them. Pinch off seedheads that form to keep the plants blooming longer.

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_annualplantingschedule/CosmosKlondikemix.jpg

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_annualplantingschedule/Celosia.jpg

The strange, contorted flowers of crested cockscomb last for many weeks in warm weather, and can be dried as well. Easy to grow in a sunny spot. Plant from May to early summer.

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_annualplantingschedule/Celosiayellow.JPG

Cockscomb also comes in a "plume" flower form. Sun-loving flowers for the summer garden.

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_annualplantingschedule/Salvia%20splendens%20Red%20Hot%20Sally.jpg

In addition to the many perennial and shrubby Salvias, the old-fashioned annual scarlet sage provides bright color in the garden all summer long. Hummingbirds are very attracted to the flowers.

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_annualplantingschedule/lobeliapalace.jpg

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_annualplantingschedule/schizanthusred1.jpg

http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_annualplantingschedule/nemesiablu.jpg