Top 10 Cool Season Plants from the Dallas Arboretum Trial Gardens

One of the great advantages of gardening in Texas is our long cool falls and usually mild winters that allow us to garden year round. This is why Texas is the leading market for pansy and other cool season crops such as dianthus and snapdragons. As a home gardener though, which varieties of the 100’s of pansies, violas, snapdragons and dianthus should you choose from? Well, we've done the work for you! Every winter the Dallas Arboretum's Trial Garden is filled with 1,000’s of plant entries in our constant search for the best varieties to use in our area, and I've listed my favorite varieties of our most used cool season annuals to help you out.

1. **Pansies** *(Viola x wittrockiana)* are the most common cool season bedding plant in Texas for a good reason. They consistently perform and they come in every color. But something most Texans don't know is that bigger flowers do not mean better plants. We’ve found that the mid-sized varieties flower more, return faster after hard freezes and last longer in the heat. The best performers historically in our trials are the ‘Nature’ and ‘Panola’ series of pansies. They have compact plants with 2-1/2 inch flowers in many colors that are held just above the foliage.

2. **Violas** *(Viola cornuta)* - If you really want a lot of color for your money, then choose the smaller flowered violas. Believe it or not, plant for plant vs. pansies they deliver more flower power! They show wonderfully from a distance because there are so many blossoms and the plants are tough. The best scoring varieties for us have been the ‘Sorbet’ series, ‘Penny’ series and the ‘Skippy XL’ series. Truthfully there isn’t a bad viola out there!

3. **Dianthus** *(Dianthus x hybridus)* Who doesn’t love sweet scented dianthus flowers? These camation relatives are one of our favorite fall and winter planted annuals because they love alkaline soil. Though they may not flower heavily through the winter months, if planted now they will explode in to huge flower displays in early spring. There are numerous choices in this group, but the varieties that have performed best for us are the ‘Elotion’, ‘Telstar’ and ‘Floral Lace’ series. All form compact plants with large flower heads lasting late into the spring. If you want something a little taller try the 2-tall ‘Amazon’ series dianthus, which produces softball sized flower heads on glossy foliage.

4. **Snapdragons** *(Antirrhinum majus)* For best performance, they should be planted in the fall. When it comes to picking varieties your first thought should be how tall would you like them to be as they range in size from 6” tall little balls to 5 ft. tall plants. My favorite dwarf variety is currently the ‘Chimes’ series which tops out at 10” tall. It has the classic upright spike flower we most relate with snapdragons. If you want something a little taller go for the ‘La Bella’ series which will reach 18 to 20”. This series also has open type flowers that don’t “snap”. For the taller types look for the ‘Liberty’ & ‘Sonnet’ series. Both of these get 2 to 2-1/2 feet tall with large spikes of flowers.

5. **Iceland Poppies** *(Papaver nudicaule)* Everyone knows what poppies are but few gardeners realize that this particular group does exceptionally well as a cool season annual in Texas. If fall planted Iceland poppies with grow into 10” mounds of light green foliage all winter rewarding you in mid-spring with hundreds of 5” across flowers in shades of apricot-burneze, orange, pink, scarlet, yellow, and creamy white. The variety that has performed the best for us is ‘Champagne Bubbles’

6. **Linaria hybrida ‘Enchantment’** A beautiful plant with a terrible common name “Tadflax” This winter flowering annual has very fragrant blooms of intense magenta with a gold center which are produced continuously. Wonderful addition to winter containers, or try under-planting it with spring flowering bulbs.

7. **Erysimum species ‘Citrona’** Series This exceptionally floriferous annual has performed well and delighted us the last few years in our trial garden. Bright orange or yellow sweetly scented flowers last from fall until spring. Wonderful mixed with pansies or violas in containers.

8. **Digitalis purpurea ‘Camelot’** Everyone knows what foxglove is, but did you know it makes a great spring flowering annual for us? That is if you remembered to plant them in the garden before January. Fill the gaps in your perennial border with this winter hardy plant and your garden will be filled with 4 ft. tall spikes of the classic flower. We like the ‘Camelot’ series because it forms multiple flower spikes and doesn’t need staking. Just remember in Texas this plant is a winter annual only.

9. **Ornamental Kale** *(Brassica oleracea)* - The garden isn’t always about flowers, but sometimes ornamental foliage. Ornamental Kale is indispensable to the winter landscape. There are just not many choices for tall plants to use in the back of the bed or in containers. For that reason three of my favorite kale varieties are BIG! ‘Red Bor’ is my absolute favorite with deep burgundy red foliage from early fall until April. This plant will easily reach 3 ft. tall and look perfect all winter long. ‘Feather’ and ‘Peacock’ kale both form large rosettes of deep red or white colored leaves that can reach 3 ft. across. All kale are heavy feeders so fertilize them a couple of times over the season.

10. **Cardoon** *(Cynara cardunculus)* This relative of the edible globe artichoke guaranteed to get your neighbors talking. The silvery arching foliage will form a 3 ft. across clump during the winter and in spring large bright blue thistle like flowers appear. I use these in mass plantings and as container accent plants. Not only is it beautiful the young tender stems taste like artichokes.