Putting Snap in Your Garden!
Pick the right variety, plant at the right time and grow fabulous snapdragons

Jimmy Turner

We Texans love nothing better than to regale listeners with tales of our blast-furnace summers; seldom do we praise our mild winters. Few parts of the nation can garden year 'round like we can and, even though we can have color in winter, not many of us venture past pansies, violas, and perhaps dianthus. One of my favorites, the classic snapdragon, is often forgotten.

I think too many bad experiences with poor cultivar choices have led gardeners to believe that snapdragons don't perform well. Not all snapdragon series are created equal; some perform better in containers and others in the garden. In addition, performance varies by series depending on the time of the year they are planted. To compound the problem, commercial growers and breeders have selected varieties that look and grow best in a 4” pot, but that doesn’t necessarily guarantee they will perform well once you get them home. Read on for the best varieties to use in your yard. I'd like to excite you to the possibilities of using some snapdragons this year.

General Description

There are few people who can't identify a snapdragon. Their unique flower shape and frequent use as a cut flower make them a familiar plant. The common name “snapdragon” comes from the flower shape which will open its “mouth” or “snap.” Showing kids how the flower will snap if squeezed on both sides is a sure way to get them involved in gardening. Be careful though — you might come home to find whole plants stripped of blooms! This unique flower shape evolved to aid pollination. When the bumblebee steps on the bottom petal, the flower opens and “snaps,” depositing pollen on the bee's back.

The Latin name for snapdragon is *Antirrhinum majus*, which means large snout or nose, referring to the dragon-like

Above: This ‘Kim’ bicolor is among the medium-height snapdragons recommended for either spring or fall planting. It performs readily in both garden and container settings.
face of the flowers. These natives of the Mediterranean grow wild from Morocco and Portugal north to southern France and east to Turkey. Like all plants of this region, they do not tolerate wet or soggy soils.

The most common colors available in snapdragons are shades of pink, red, purple, orange, yellow and white. My favorite colors are the bi-colored forms that have two-tone flowers such as red and yellow, lavender and white, or orange and yellow. Snapdragons are available in almost every color except blue. Blooming usually starts in early spring and peaks mid-April through May, after which the snaps politely decline and leave room for summer annuals. Because of this, I love to use them in clusters throughout my perennial borders. They give me a burst of early spring color, and by the time my summer perennials overtake them, they have gone out of flower. They also make great combination plants for containers.

GROWING CONDITIONS

In the lower part of Zone 7 to Zone 9, plant at the onset of cooler fall weather, between late-September and early-December. Snapdragons that are grown over winter will bulk up and produce many more flower stems and bloom longer than those planted in early spring.

Avoid planting too late in fall, which makes the plants vulnerable to a sudden extreme drop in temperature. The earlier you plant, the longer the plants will have to become hardened and thus more cold hardy. When shopping, look for plants with darker green foliage and thick stems; this is usually a sign that the nursery hardened the plants outside rather than in a greenhouse.

All snapdragons prefer full sun and must have well-drained soil — a challenge since they grow only in our cooler seasons of greatest rainfall. Snapdragons are one of the few plants for which I highly recommend deadheading. Shear the top of the plant off below the finished flower stalks. You will often be rewarded with a second flush of bloom, especially from those planted in fall.

SNAPDRAGON TYPES

The comprehensive discussion of available snapdragon varieties that follows is broken into four categories based on actual height in our Dallas Arboretum trials. One thing we discovered is that, on average, the taller the snapdragon the longer the bloom period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Height</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dwarf</td>
<td>Less than 10&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>12&quot; to 18&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tall</td>
<td>18&quot; to 24&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extra Tall</td>
<td>Over 30&quot;</td>
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Snapdragons now come in two flower types. There are the traditional flower form with the “snapping” blooms and the “butterfly” or “open” type of blossoms. The open form has blossoms that resemble a bell and do not “snap.” This type is not as popular with gardeners, but what endears them to me is they stay in full bloom about a week longer than the traditional flower form.

DWARF SNAPS

Dwarf snaps stay less than 10 inches tall and form spreading mounds of foliage. They can be subdivided into two forms.

The first — my least favorite — forms flowers in small clusters across the plant, instead of spikes. Used mainly for color in containers, these are also the ones you must often find for sale in 4-inch pots. Their short stature and compact habit do make them useful as fast color in the late spring garden, but I do not recommend planting them in fall or winter. The series with this habit include ‘Floral Showers’, ‘Montego’, ‘Tahiti’, and ‘Palette’.

The other type of dwarf snap also stays less than 10 inches tall, but it flowers in the classic upright spike form. Of the two dwarf forms I prefer this one because the flowers are held on stronger stems that help them hold up to heavy spring winds and rains. My three favorite series of this group are ‘Chimes’, ‘Snapshot’ and ‘Bells’. ‘Chimes’ has a very compact habit and comes in nine colors and a mixture. ‘Snapshot’ is a little taller and comes in nine colors plus a mix, along with the designer “Merlot Mix” in shades of plum and purple. ‘Chimes’ has reliably given me two flushes of flowers every spring. ‘Bells’ has the “open” or butterfly-type bloom and lasts a week longer in the garden than any other dwarf form we’ve tested.

MEDIUM SNAPS

In the words of Goldilocks these are the “just right” snapdragon — not too tall or too short, ranging from 12 inches to 18 inches tall in the garden, making them equally useful in the front of the bed or in the mid-border. They are vigorous enough to be planted in fall or spring. This is the group I use most for spring planting. They are quick to bloom and they put on a large floral display quickly. These are also my favorite for containers; they spread enough to fill in, but are not so tall that they overwhelm the pot. Medium-sized snaps are still compact enough to be sold in 4-inch pots, but you may also see them in quart-sized containers. I have three favorite series in this group: ‘Kim’, ‘Crown’ and ‘Solstice’. ‘Kim’ forms 15-inch mounds of foliage covered in multiple blossom spikes which all bloom at once. ‘Crown’ is the tallest of this group at 18 inches and is always the first to come into flower. This series comes in an assortment of colors and several “designer mixes” such as ‘Bubble Gum Mix’ and ‘Terracotta Mix’. ‘Solstice’, available in nine colors, tops out at 20
inches and reliably gives me two flushes of bloom.

**Tall Snaps**

If I could pick only one group of snaps to use, it would be this one. Unfortunately, they are often the hardest to find because growers and retailers don’t often offer them for sale; they just don’t look as good in a 4” pot at the nursery. This is my favorite group for fall planting; their extra vigor allows them to fill in over winter and form huge flower displays in early spring. Planted in fall, they easily will develop 10-20 huge flower stalks per plant. The long, tall stems make them perfect for bringing into the house as cutflowers. Another reason this is my favorite group is the extra-long bloom time. (Again, the taller the snap the longer the bloom!) There are many choices in this group. ‘Coronette’ series has super sturdy plants with multiple flower spikes. ‘La Bella’ series is my current favorite. It has the open flower form (which lasts longer in the garden) and produces multiple branches of blooms. Other series you will find are ‘Liberty Classic’, ‘Ribbon, and ‘Sonnet’ or ‘Speedy Sonnet’. All perform equally well in the garden.

**Extra Tall Snaps**

If you want to impress your neighbors with your prowess, then these are the snaps for you. Reaching heights between 30 inches and 45 inches tall, they definitely stand out in the landscape. Plant them only in fall though; spring plantings just do not have enough time to fill in before they flower. The ‘Rocket’ series has been on the market for many years as both a garden variety and as a commercial cutflower variety. Their 45-inch-tall flower spikes make them perfect for cutting, but in areas of high wind, you might have to stake them. ‘Madame Butterfly’ series is completely different from any other snapdragon. It has fully double flowers that look like miniature azalea blooms on a stalk. Plant these near a walkway or in containers so passersby can appreciate the unique flower form.

**Summary**

Here’s hoping you’re excited about planting snapdragons this year — and armed with the information to find the right one for your garden. Just remember, if planting in spring, go with the medium height varieties. If you can plant in fall, then go with the taller series. Branch out a little and try some of the “butterfly” types; their long bloom time is worth it. Just find the right size for your garden, and pick a color you like. ★

**About the author:** Jimmy Turner is the Director of Horticulture Research at the Dallas Arboretum. Visit www.dallasplanttrials.org for more information on his trials.
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