



## Snapdragons

by Sue Rideout, Master Gardener

Snapdragons form a very familiar but beautiful part of our Central Valley winter landscapes. Whether lining shopping mall drives, our sidewalks, or in garden beds, they bring a welcome brightness to the season. A Mediterranean native, snapdragons have long been used in the landscape and cut-flower industry and perform well in our area. When planted in the early fall season, snapdragons provide almost continuous blooms from late fall through spring. They'll even take a little rest in summer and revive in the fall.

The Latin name (*Antirrhinum majus*) means "like a snout" which tries to describe their calf-like (or dragon-like) faces. Individual flowers of the basic snapdragon have 5 lobes, which are divided into unequal upper and lower "jaws". Children love to press lightly behind the blossom to make the "jaws" snap. However, with children, it should be noted that both the plants and flowers are toxic if eaten. In ancient times snapdragons were thought to have magical powers offering protection against witchcraft. Today we just use their colorful powers to ward off winter blues!

Snapdragons which are available in every color but "true blue" can be classified by both size and flower form or shape. Flower shapes include: snapping type, azalea-like, and bell-flowered. Among the "snapping type" of blossoms are the tall (over 2 feet) Rocket series with fragrant flower spikes and then there is Appleblossom which grows to 3 feet. Intermediate varieties (1 to 2 feet) include Lipstick with bi-colored blossoms, Cinderella, and the Ribbon series among others. Floral Carpet and Floral Showers are nice varieties in the dwarf category.

Snapdragons can also have open, "azalea-type" blossoms. 'Madame Butterfly' (2½ feet), 'Sweetheart' (1 foot), and 'Pixie Mix' (6 to 8 inches) are examples of this type of flower form. "Bell-flowered" varieties include Bright Butterflies, Wedding Bells, Little Darling, and Liberty Bell. Chinese Lanterns is a delightful cascading plant which is great for hanging baskets.

Perennial flowers that are usually treated as annuals, snapdragons are easy to grow. If planted from seed, they should be started indoors 8 weeks before the first frost and planted out in when the weather turns cool in the fall. More common is to purchase six packs of small plants from nurseries and transplanting in late September through October. If the plants grow buds before frost, they will bloom all winter and up to the onset of hot weather.

Snapdragons grow best in sun or part sun and like a moist, well-drained soil. Work in compost or peat for the healthiest plants. Mulching helps to preserve moisture and prevent weeds. Pinching back young plants and removing spent blooms promote a bushy habit and a long flowering season.

Rust is a foliar disease that forms "rust colored" spots on the undersides of leaves. This disease is about the only problem snapdragons have in our area. It can be controlled by planting rust-resistant varieties and leaving space



Snapdragons are a very popular cut flower.



Greenhouse grown salvia, snapdragons, and primroses.

between plants for air circulation. Watering from below with drip irrigation instead of sprinklers is also a good gardening practice. Rusts are spread primarily by windblown spores but plants must be wet to become infected. When winters are laden with tule fog, rust can be particularly problematic.

A related plant, native to the California Channel Islands, is the Island Snapdragon (*Galvezia speciosa*). A woody perennial, Island Bush Snapdragon is a drought tolerant small bush with glossy green leaves and showy red flowers which attract hummingbirds. The Firecracker variety is compact and presents abundant flowers on the branch tips.

In our hot summers Island Snapdragon appreciates some midday shade. Though very drought tolerant, it flowers best with some occasional summer water. It is frost tolerant to 28 degrees but may suffer some damage below that temperature. It will usually regain its vigor when the temperatures warm.

Snapdragons grace our winter gardens in many colors, sizes and flower types. They are great companions to pansies, ornamental kale and primroses. So add them to your winter landscape for cheer and color.

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Snapdragon blossoms form along a terminal flower spike called a raceme.