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The leaves have been falling in earnest and the summer bedding plants are fading away. If you have not planted winter annuals, there is still time, but you need to get them planted soon. The idea of months without flowers seems a waste, especially when we can have an outstanding display of color from pansies, violas, Swiss chard and more all winter long. So, instead of ending your flower gardening for the year, you need to be adding to your winter color, or maintaining what you have planted.

Cool season annuals can be planted from late September through December. When planting late in the season, be sure to choose strong, healthy plants with blooms on them. If you plant young, small plants during the later planting, you may wait until spring before you see any blooms.

Pansies are still the most popular of the cool season bedding plants and come in a variety of sizes, colors and types. They come in blues, reds, yellows, white, orange, pink and purple. There is even a black variety. There are solid colors without faces called clears, to bi-colors with contrasting faces, to blended colors, giving you a mix of colors in each bloom. Intense breeding has developed flowers that can get as large as four and a half inches across. It is hard to believe that these large, brightly colored flowers are descendants of the quiet, diminutive woodland violets.

The flowers have a velvety texture and bloom over a long period of time. To keep the plants blooming, be sure to dead-head--remove spent flowers as they decline. Pansies thrive in cool weather, and will bloom for you from now until hot weather causes them to decline next summer. If you planted them early this fall, they may have gotten a bit leggy with the extended hot weather we had. Fertilize them and water, and they should bounce back. They need a well-drained location with moderately rich soil and do like regular applications of fertilizer. They will grow in full sun to partial shade.

Violas are a smaller flowering winter annual, which I often think we have better luck with in Arkansas. They can tolerate more fluctuations of temperature so can be planted earlier in the fall and will last later in the spring. Although the flowers are smaller, the plants are covered with blooms.

Snapdragons and dianthus are two other flowering options that have been lasting almost year-round with periods of blooms and resting periods throughout the summer and winter.

Don't overlook leafy plants. From the edible Swiss chard, beets, mustard and kale to the ornamental kale and cabbage, these plants can last all winter and provide you with good color. If you plant the edible varieties you can have color and beauty, but eat them as well. When using edibles make sure you harvest judiciously since you want them to still look good all winter.

When planting seasonal color, it is best to plant in a mass of color so it can make a bigger impact. Plant the individual flowering plants four to six inches apart with the kale and cabbage a bit further apart. Winter annuals make a great companion planting for

spring flowering bulbs. Simply dig up the bed, plant the bulbs first, cover them with soil, and then plant the pansies or violas on top. The spring bulbs will come up right through the flowers for even more color in the spring.

Winter annual also make ideal container plantings. If you live in an apartment or condominium, don't think that you are excluded from planting winter color. Plant a container full for your deck, patio or front porch. Regular watering will need to be included in their care--even when it is cold. It is especially important prior to a heavy freeze. They don't need to be saturated, but they do need to be moist. If the plants are too dry heading into a cold snap there is no buffer to protect them. Pay attention to the forecasts. Most pansies and violas will freeze in really hard freezes, but they should defrost and keep on blooming. Most cool season vegetables can tolerate temperatures to around 25-28 without damage, but plants in containers may need a little more protection since the soil space is limited and it will get colder than soil in the ground.

If you planted your winter color months ago, don't forget to still water when dry--it has been way to dry this fall! Just like plants in containers, if they get too dry in the ground, they won't be as cold tolerant, nor will they bloom as well. Fertilize every 3-4 weeks when we have a warm spell.

Just because cold weather is here doesn't mean our gardens should be without color. So, if you haven't planted winter annuals go visit your local nursery and see what is available and start planting.