

Yard and Garden – 04-20-2013 - Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

We all have our favorites. Most gardeners have a favorite flower, a favorite color, or perhaps even a favorite food. There can be any number of favorites. Often I am asked, “What is my favorite flower?” That question is almost impossible for me to answer. I like most all flowers and usually my favorite ends up being whatever is blooming at the time I am asked that question.

While recently cleaning out a flower border, I uncovered an old favorite. When I saw it, I immediately thought of my childhood. Mother was a passionate gardener. Her favorite flower was the bearded iris, but she loved and grew many others. Her flower beds were always filled with an assortment of flowers — perennials and annuals. One such annual, blooming year after year in her flowerbeds was *Antirrhinum majus*, more commonly called the snapdragon.

I remember asking her why they had such an unusual name. Mother explained to me that an individual snapdragon blossom resembled the jaws of a dragon. To prove it, she showed me that by squeezing the side of a snapdragon blossom, I could make the jaw open, and then snap shut when released. What a fascinating flower to a young child. It was then the snapdragon became one of my favorites.



Originating in the Mediterranean region and southern Europe, snapdragons were brought to America by the colonists. Initially, they were white or purple, but today they bloom in an assortment of colors and range in size from six inches to four feet tall.



Rocket Snaps

Snaps, as they are sometimes called, were one of the most popular cut flowers during the 1950s. During that time, plant breeders produced several popular varieties. In the 60s one variety called ‘Rocket’ won six All American Silver Awards in Horticulture. ‘Rocket’ is still available today. In 1994, the snapdragon was given the title of **Flower of the Year** by

the US National Garden Bureau. For whatever reason, in the past decade or two, the popularity of snaps has somewhat declined.

Today, I would like to inspire a revival of this old favorite. As I previously mentioned, while cleaning my flower border, I uncovered a newly emerging snapdragon. Although snaps are annuals, they can often re-seed, especially if not deadheaded. Furthermore, if protected by mulch from the winter's cold, snapdragons are capable of returning from the previous season's rootstock. That is precisely how my old favorite is returning.

Snapdragons are easy to grow. They are cool-season annuals, capable of withstanding a light frost. Like pansies, they can be planted in early spring a few weeks before the last expected frost date. After setting out plants, pinch back the tips to encourage branching. They perform best when planted in full sun but tolerate part shade. They prefer moist but well-drained soil.

The numbers of different cultivars and sizes of snapdragons offer a host of uses in the landscape. Dwarf varieties work well in container gardens, while medium height snaps work well as massed border plants. The taller varieties form a beautiful frame when placed near the back of the flower border.



Snapdragons make excellent cut flowers. They bloom profusely with spikes of colorful blossoms. With proper care, snaps will continue blooming from spring until late into the fall. Keep in mind; snapdragons continue blooming only if the spent flowers are regularly removed (deadheaded). Not only will deadheading keep the plants blooming, but it will also prevent the plants from becoming straggly as the summer progresses.

This year, give snapdragons a try. I certainly plan to grow more of this old favorite. When my grandkids come to visit, like my mother did so many years ago, I will demonstrate to them how to operate the jaws of this mystical garden dragon. By so doing, perhaps snapdragons will become one of their favorite flowers, too.