

Meet angelonia, the summer snapdragon

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AngelMist Purple in a container with white Aztec verbena

Ball Horticultural

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By TODD W. DAVIS

Special Contributor

garden@dallasnews.com

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Look out begonias, lantanas and portulacas. There's a new summer bedding plant in town, and it's taking plots and containers by storm.

Angelonias are not known by many Dallas-area gardeners, but their anonymity won't last much longer. These annuals are so tolerant of heat and drought, and flower so prolifically, that they're destined to be a staple in area landscapes.

Even more, angelonias provide something that those begonias, lantanas and portulacas can't — a cool palette of flower colors ranging from white to blue to dark violet. These hues make gardens appear a little more tolerable during the worst of the summer.

Tim Runte has worked for Fort Worth-based Calloway's Nursery for 24 years. As one of the company's primary buyers for six years, he has tested many plants as they are introduced to the market. He is sold on angelonias.

"Angelonias are still relatively unknown with most average gardeners, and that's a shame because they're such good performers," Runte says. "Last year, at our headquarters in Fort Worth, we planted them in a south-facing, 3-by-15-foot raised concrete bed with a redbud and Knock Out roses. With all that reflected heat, and with the summer we had last year, these were just brutal conditions.

"Even the Knock Out roses weren't as happy as they usually are. Their flowers weren't as big as normal, and they showed some leaf burning. But the angelonias just kept going."

Runte says the angelonias were planted around March 1 last year, and they were not replaced until around Thanksgiving.

"And we got to watch them through the seasons. They just looked remarkable."

Humble beginnings

But how come this plant is just now gaining popularity? *Angelonia angustifolia* has been around for a while. Native to tropical regions of Mexico and the West Indies, it is sometimes called summer snapdragon.

This moniker, however, is misleading. Angelonia, to the gardeners' eye, does not resemble a snapdragon, except for its upright, spiky posture.

For decades, gardeners in Florida and other tropical areas have cultivated angelonia in its native form, which is somewhat gangly and sparsely flowering. Sometime in the 1990s, plant breeders started tinkering with angelonias' DNA. Now, many generations later, they have produced more compact plants (just 12 to 18 inches high) in appealing colors that are available today as annuals to gardeners in temperate locales.

Angelonias are about as foolproof as a plant can be. Buy these plants in 4-inch pots or in smaller packs in spring or summer, and plant them about 12 inches apart. Keep the soil consistently moist for the first few weeks until they have established a root system, then watering frequency can be reduced.

Low care

These annuals can be planted in almost any soil, including clay, but they prefer amended garden soils. If planted in loose dirt amended with organic matter and lightly mulched, angelonias will get by on even less water.

Just how much water they need will depend on many variables. But if you're a gardener who likes to water frequently, the angelonias will do fine along with the rest of what is planted in your beds. If you're one to let

your beds dry out between waterings, you'll find that angelonias are going to be one of the last plants to show drought stress.

Angelonias grow best if planted in full sun, but they will perform in filtered shade. Expect the plants to stay smaller and not flower as much. Deep shade, such as under a southern magnolia tree, is not recommended.

Angelonias also make remarkable container plants, either planted alone or mixed with other summer annuals.

There are multiple series of angelonias developed by many seed companies, but Runte says, "I haven't found one that I don't like."

Try looking for Serena, ArchAngel, AngelMist, Angelica and Sungelonia series. If you shop around, you can find a variety of colors (whites, blues, purples, bicolors and even a few raspberry reds). Some of the trailing types are exceptional choices for hanging baskets.

Todd W. Davis is a Richardson gardener and freelance writer.

Where to buy angelonias

Calloway's, multiple locations

Covington's Nursery, Rowlett

The Flower Ranch, Keller and Rhome

Marshall Grain, Grapevine and Fort Worth

Nicholson-Hardie, both Dallas locations

North Haven Gardens, Dallas

Redenta's Garden, Dallas and Arlington