

## **Perk Up Your Landscape With Fall Color!**

by Debbie Lauer, Bell County Master Gardener

As we suffer through the last few weeks of a scorching summer, it is not too late to grow fall color for your landscape from seed. We are blessed with warm fall and mild winter weather which make it possible to enjoy blooming annuals longer than the rest of the country. Start now and be the envy of the neighborhood this fall.

To get good quality plants, start with good seed. While some seed is viable for years, it is a good idea to purchase fresh seed which has this year stamped on the packet. If you have seed from previous years lying around you may want to test it to see if it will germinate. Wet two paper towels and squeeze out the excess water. Place a small amount of your seed on one towel making sure that the seeds do not touch each other, cover with the other paper towel and put in a sealable plastic bag. Place bag in a warm and bright location. If you get only a few to germinate you will want to get some fresh seed.

You have many options when it comes to selecting the media to start your seeds in. The things to keep in mind are that it should be sterile, fine, loose and well aerated. A good home made mix of one third soil, one third vermiculite or perlite, and one third peat moss is a good place to start. Mix the ingredients thoroughly and moisten with water until it will hold together loosely when squeezed. Fill containers to within  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch from the top and gently firm the growing media into the corners and smooth the surface. Containers can be anything you have from old cottage cheese containers, Styrofoam cups, cut off milk cartons, to clay or plastic pots. Whatever you choose be sure that it is clean and that it has holes in the bottom for drainage. Some gardeners rinse their containers in a 10% solution of bleach and water after cleaning out dirt and old plant material.

Now you are ready to plant. Sow seeds thinly and uniformly to a depth of about twice the diameter of the seed. For very small seed such as pansy or snapdragon, spread seed on top of the soil; if it needs darkness to germinate (pansy) top with a thin layer of very fine vermiculite or peat moss. Water seeds using a mister or by placing container in a shallow pan of water, drain off any excess water and place the container in a plastic bag, keeping the plastic at least 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches above the soil. Place container in a warm (not hot) location, preferable one with early morning sun and afternoon shade. When seedlings appear remove from plastic bag. To avoid having to transplant seedlings multiple times plant only a few seeds per container, and thin to one plant after a few weeks.

In late September or early October plant your annuals into prepared beds or containers. Good selections for fall annual color are pansies, Johnny-jump-ups, violas, calendula, alyssum, California poppy, candytuft, snapdragon, stock, and ornamental kale. Protect your plants when the occasional blue norther blows in this winter and they might survive to bloom again in the spring.