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GARDEN NOTES

PRIMROSE AND PANSIES LAUGH AT WINTER

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Northern Utah weather always teases us with a few warm snowless days before the real spring arrives about June 1. Fortunately there are a couple of flowering plants as hardy and patient as northern Utah's human residents.

Pansies and primroses will soon be available in the nurseries and garden centers, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. Both these flowers are grown for their early spring color. Planted in the fall, pansy flowers often pop up through a light snow cover, bringing color to an otherwise drab landscape. Neither primroses nor pansies have many pests. Their biggest scourge is probably slugs and snails. These pesky critters like the same type of environment that pansies and primroses enjoy—wet and cool.

"Pansies are actually a biennial (a plant with a two-year life cycle)," he explains. "They can, however, be grown for a few years, and reseed if the conditions are right. The pansies in my yard have been blooming since they were planted in late fall. This winter's warmer temperatures have allowed them to thrive."

Primroses are a perennial, but in Utah often seem like an annual, because they die out after a year or two, Goodspeed says. To understand why they are not always successfully grown in our gardens, we need to understand what the optimum conditions are for their survival.

"Most primroses are found in mild, wet climates," he says. "England is known for its beautiful primroses that bloom throughout the spring and early summer. Many native primroses grow naturally in some older gardens in England. They also flourish in the Pacific Northwest and on the East Coast. All these places are known for their mild, moist climates."

Primroses also do best in soil that is high in organic matter, he adds. In Utah, this can be accomplished by adding as much organic material as possible to our flower beds. This also makes the soil a bit more acidic, which is another primrose favorite.

Primroses are generally hardy enough to withstand Utah winters, Goodspeed says. The season they actually have problems with is summer. Our hot, arid summer weather can cause them to struggle. Like me, they prefer summer highs reaching a comfortable 75 or 80 F. Unfortunately, even shade offers them little respite from the dry heat. Most primroses prefer a shady to semi-shady location such as under a tree that offers some filtered light throughout the

day. An eastern or northern exposure is also a good location.

"Pansies can also grow in a partially shady location, but actually prefer full sun," he says. "The dry heat in Utah though, can cause them to fade. Most gardeners grow pansies from September through the end of March, then pull them up and plant those wimpy annuals to fill-in the area with color for the summer.

"Although both plants can be grown for more than a season if the conditions are right, I consider them a spring annual. I figure this is the reason they evolved so they are available in the nurseries in late winter. It gives me something to do this time of the year, and adds color to the flower beds until the fair-weather annuals arrive on the scene in mid-May."

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