

Candytuft

Candytuft. The word conjures up visions of small tufts of candy--and that isn't far off the mark. Candytuft, *Iberis sempervirens*, is a sweet plant, with clusters of pure white flowers on a low growing evergreen plant. And it is easy to grow.

While the name does suggest a sweet confection, the name Candytuft actually originated from Candia, or Crete, from whence it came to England. The "tufts" arise from the clusters of flowers--or some may say, the tufted growth. *Iberis Sempervirens*, the Latin name has a different origin. Of the forty or so species of the plant, most were discovered in Spain--originally known as Iberia.--thus *Iberis*. *Sempervirens* is Latin; *semper* for "always" and *virens* for "alive"--always alive--evergreen.

There are actually several species of candytuft, but two are common in our market--one is an evergreen perennial, and one is an annual. The perennial form, *Iberis sempervirens*, is by far the better performer, giving us a great border plant or addition to the rock garden. The foliage has a nice bluish cast to it, year-round, so it is attractive even without the flowers. But it really shines when in bloom. The flowers are a very bright white in color, and can be in bloom for up to ten weeks in early to mid spring.

Annual candytuft, *Iberis umbellata*, is rarely seen as a garden transplant in Arkansas, but is commonly sold in seed packets. The flowers range in colors from yellows, to pinks to lilac. It has an upright growth habit, and gets to be close to a foot tall. It does not like hot weather. It is a cool season annual that is best planted by seed in the fall for early spring bloom, or in pots indoors eight weeks before frost to use as an early spring annual.

The perennial plant--*Iberis sempervirens*, is a better plant for our gardens. It prefers a sunny location with a well drained soil, and will definitely bloom best in full sun, however, you can see a few blooms in a semi-shaded location. After bloom, give the plant a haircut to keep it full and lush. Cutting them back to within two or three inches from the ground, will prevent the stem from getting too woody and sprawling or appearing leggy.

If you don't prune the plant back, you will also get clusters of seed heads. The plant does propagate easily from seed, cuttings or division. Cuttings taken in mid-summer, root easily. Dividing the clumps can be done spring or fall.

The *sempervirens* species is a good plant, but there are numerous cultivars available which offer some improvements--both in flowering and plant size. 'Autumn Beauty' will bloom in the spring, and then repeat blooming in the fall. Some smaller growing cultivars include: 'Little Gem', 'Nana', and 'Pygmaea'.

Regardless of the cultivar you choose, you will be rewarded with a sea of pure white every spring, with the perennial candytuft.

This story first appeared in the **AR Gardener Magazine**.
By: Janet Carson