

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 12-11-02) , ©2005

Cyclamen are one of my favorite plants for interest and beauty. Outdoor varieties thriving in Northwest gardens are most likely *Cyclamen hederifolium* (fall blooming) and *Cyclamen coum* (late winter blooming). The houseplants we're most familiar with are usually called "Florist Cyclamen." But are probably varieties of the tuber *Cyclamen persicum*.

In the past if you were to look up Florist Cyclamen in a book or on the web you'd read that these Cyclamen should be treated as disposable plants. Or that the tubers should dry out entirely and have a time of rest in order to thrive and bloom again. Most of this lore dates back into the 90s or earlier. Today's varieties often last several years or more.

I received a gorgeous magenta-rose Cyclamen in a ten-inch pot last November. It bloomed for nearly six months, took a slight rest from flowering, loved being repotted in mid-September and is now blooming profusely in it's twelve-inch diameter clay pot on a table about seven feet away from a large west facing window. My Cyclamen also shares space with two huge pots holding groups of *Dendrobium* orchids.

Hardy cyclamen are dainty plants forming a carpet of green leaves followed by flowers. Mine grow in a bed on the south east side of the house receiving morning sun but are shaded from the hot afternoon sun by other plants. They're nestled among several varieties of ferns (Painted ferns and Lady ferns) near the feet of a Japanese maple and a deciduous huckleberry. My varieties have just finished blooming and the small leaves have silvery light green spots on a very dark background. The little colony of cyclamen is happily multiplying each year. They disappear into dormancy in late spring and through summer but happily surprise me as I walk by them during fall and winter. My Cyclamen bloom in shades of palest pink to white.

The blooms of Cyclamen have been described as shooting stars or clusters of butterfly wings. The flowers consist of five petals held upright on single stems. The blossoms almost look as if they are turned wrong side out. Colors range from pure white through all shades of pink, lavender, purple and red to dark wine. I haven't seen dark wine yet, but if I do you can bet I'll buy at least one immediately.

When we lived in England we went on a holiday to Greek Cypress one November. While there we visited the catacombs (open caves in sandstone). The weather was in the 70s and 80s and it had rained that morning. All over the rocky nooks and crannies of stone we saw Cyclamen just emerging and springing into bloom in shades of white, pink and rose. The sight has stayed with me always and has remained one of my favorite memories.

Nearly all our local nurseries offer Hardy Cyclamen. These plants grow well in our acid soils and enjoy our rainy and shady days. Going dormant in the dryer months of summer they'll thrive again, never fear. Hardy Cyclamen can sometimes be slow to get started but once established will happily carpet a corner of your garden.

Florist's Cyclamen require frequent watering (at least once or twice a week if your house is warm and dry). You can either put the pot in a bowl of water until the soil becomes evenly moist or water from the top, but don't leave the plant sitting in water only moisten the soil. Be careful not to water the very center of the plant. When repotting make sure one-third to one-half of the tuber remains exposed and not covered with soil.

Pull off the leaves and flowering stems when they begin to fade. If the leaves turn yellow around the edges it means you need to water the plant and/or move it to a brighter spot. Cyclamen usually thrive happily on neglect. If your Cyclamen dies, don't worry too much. You can always buy new plants each summer and winter. Many gardeners plant Florist's Cyclamen in containers, beds and borders during gardening season. Give yourself permission to treat them as annuals.

Visit www.cyclamen.org for the Cyclamen Society pages where you'll find everything you can imagine about this tempting plant. If you want to try your luck at growing Cyclamen from seed this is the site for you. The color photos and horticulture details are well worth the look. Even Ed Hume and Ciscoe Morris have Cyclamen information on their websites at www.humeseeds.com and www.ciscoe.com.

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