

by deryn thorpe

pretty in PINK

Cyclamen provide beautiful indoor colour, flowering for months, and put on a spectacular display when mass planted in the garden

When all the colourful potted cyclamen appear in the nurseries, I buy them as gifts for my non-gardening friends, hoping that their flamboyant flowers will foster a new appreciation for gardening.

I tend to choose these potted beauties over other plants because I find their striking flowers, which remind me of gracefully upswept ballerina skirts, totally irresistible. Over a period of a few months, cyclamen are total bloom machines, so I know my friends will enjoy their flowers for a long time.

These flashy potted plants are known as 'florist's cyclamens', usually hybrids of *Cyclamen persicum*, and are sold in their thousands while flowering in winter and spring. There are dwarf and standard forms, and flower types include doubles, bicolours, frilled and picotee. Some varieties are perfumed.

Potted cyclamen come in a wide range of dramatic colours, from white through to purple, pink and red, with two complementary plants sometimes put in the one pot. When grown indoors, they need natural light and do best when located near a window. Cyclamen like cool nights, so consider putting them outside in the evening and never leave them near the heater!

Water gently from the pot's edge to avoid wetting the foliage and central growing point. Promote further blooms by pulling out spent flowers and applying a liquid bloom booster fortnightly.

Like all houseplants, cyclamen must not be overwatered. Put your finger a few centimetres into the potting mix and only water if it's dry. ►

CARPET OF BLOOMS
A mass of *Cyclamen hederifolium* makes a colourful cover at the base of a pine tree.

"can I plant my potted cyclamen outside?"

Most people discard plants after they finish flowering in early summer, but it is possible to keep them for subsequent flowering. Put the pot outside in a shady spot and keep dry over summer, only supplying enough water to stop the tuber from shrivelling. Re-pot in autumn and water with a liquid fertiliser when new leaves start to appear. Plants can live for many years when treated this way.

PHOTO ALAMY

at a glance

Common name
cyclamen (also known as alpine violet)

Botanical name

Cyclamen spp.

Plant type

tuberous perennial

↑ 8–20cm

↔ 15–30cm

☁️ semi-shade

to full shade

🕒 year-round (depends on species)

🪴 suitable

❄️ many are frost-hardy (depends on species)



■ suitable

"Young tubers produce several flowers over a few weeks and older ones, which can grow to the size of a dinner plate, can produce hundreds of flowers"

the outdoors type

Cyclamen persicum is the most flamboyantly flowering of the 23 cyclamen species, almost all of which are native to Europe and the Mediterranean, east to Iran – one species hails from Somalia.

Members of the primrose family, these diminutive tuberous perennials grow to no more than 20cm tall. The flowers may be as tiny as 1.5cm but are usually twice that size. Non-hybrid forms are available in evergreen and deciduous forms, and are really easy to grow. These miniature versions of the florist hybrids, with five upswept petals, are usually pink or white. Many have a darker blotch of magenta at the flower base.

Their small stature makes them well suited to rockeries and woodland settings. You can also grow them in garden beds if you ensure they aren't disturbed. In my Perth garden, I grow a small collection of species in wide bowls (so I can bring them close to the house when in flower) and have planted drifts of the ivy-leaved cyclamen (*C. hederifolium*) beneath trees.

Since most cyclamen species originate from the Mediterranean, where summers are hot and dry and winters are cool and wet, they are summer-dormant plants, with leaves appearing after autumn rains and withering in spring. However, the leaves of species from cooler mountain regions (*C. purpurascens* and *C. colchicum*) are evergreen.

Cyclamen are worth growing just for their decorative foliage. Leaves are usually dark green, and most forms feature beautiful silvery marbling in intricate patterns. Leaves can feature blotches, speckles and bands of black, green, cream, grey and silver, some in an ornate filigree design. No two plants are the same, and a mass planting creates a shimmering, intricate carpet.

The leaves sprout from points on top of the tuber and have their own stem. Leaf shapes vary between species: *C. hederifolium* is ivy-like, *C. coum* have rounded leaves and *C. persicum*, *C. repandum* and *C. graecum* are heart-shaped, with the latter two being finely toothed. Leaf undersides range from green to rich red or purple.



IN THE GROUND Clockwise from top: Planting cyclamen under a birch-bark cherry tree; combining cyclamen with tulips for textural contrast; *C. hederifolium* in its white form 'Alba'; the variegated leaves of *C. graecum* are known for their beauty.



good species

- ***C. cilicium*** The leaves may be heart-shaped or oval, often with silver markings. Autumn flowers are either fragrant white or rose-pink, with a magenta blotch at the base.
- ***C. coum*** (left) Dark magenta, pink and white flowers in winter have a magenta blotch at the base. The dark green leaves may be marbled.
- ***C. graecum*** This has autumn blooms, which may be fragrant. 'Album' is a white form. Its patterned leaves are exceptionally beautiful. Keep plants reasonably dry over summer.
- ***C. libanoticum*** From Lebanon, this has beautiful angular, patterned leaves. Its pale-pink spring blooms are the biggest flowers of the genus.
- ***C. repandum*** Fragrant spring flowers of carmine-pink or white feature dramatically twisted petals on long stems. Leaves are large, mottled and heart- or ivy-shaped. Not for pots.
- ***C. rhodium*** Pink, scented flowers with magenta at the base appear in spring. Leaves are kidney-shaped. It's not frost hardy. Plant 5cm deep and keep dry during summer.

WHERE TO BUY

Cyclamen are available at specialist nurseries, including Dicksonia Rare Plants (stephenryan.com.au), Hill View Rare Plants (hillviewrareplants.com.au), Lambley Nursery (lambley.com.au), Moidart Nurseries (moidart.com.au), Raithby Plant Nursery (raithbyplants.com.au) and The Jindivick Country Gardener Rare Plant Nursery (jindivickcountrygardener.com.au)

growing tips

I bought my plants as tubestock and tubers, and you will find the best range of species at specialist rare plant nurseries. While planting methods do vary between species, tubers are generally planted less than a few centimetres deep, with the growing point facing upward. This growing point is usually readily apparent, since the other side is quite featureless. If your tuber is saucer-shaped, on the other hand, these are planted with the concave side upward and convex side down.

The name cyclamen, in fact, comes from the Greek word *kylos*, meaning 'circle', referring to the rounded tubers. Young tubers produce several flowers over a few weeks. Older ones, which can grow to the size of a dinner plate, can produce hundreds of flowers.

You can also grow them from seed, as clumps flower best if left undisturbed. Be patient as it takes two to three years for them to flower. Soak seed for 10 hours,

rinse and sow into small pots with a free-draining mix. Cover the seed with a thin layer of sieved compost, as they prefer darkness. You can expect germination in four to six weeks, although growers report that some species can take up to a year!

Once growing, cyclamen plants don't need much fertiliser – mine thrive on a sprinkle of slow-release and some organic mulch. Most species prefer slightly alkaline soil but *C. hederifolium* is less fussy and grows in acid soils. I particularly enjoy watching the plant's own ingenious way of distributing itself. As flowers die, the stems bend to the ground and the seed case expands then finally splits, exposing the seed itself.

While most seeds germinate close to the parent plant, the seed is cleverly coated in a starch that changes to a sweet substance attractive to ants. They eat the sticky coating then discard the seed after carrying it away from the original flower. **GA**

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