



Cyclamen

Cyclamens belong to the primrose (Primulaceae) family. They are native to hills and mountains around the Mediterranean region, and southwest Asia. There are about 20 species in the genus. These cheery and bright tuberous plants, with distinctive downward-facing flowers and attractive foliage are well adapted to areas with long hot summers and cool, moist winters. They do well in rockeries, raised beds, and woodland settings. Many of the smaller species are choice for rock garden plants, the larger *Cyclamen persicum*, parent to a number of very attractive cultivars, is more popular in pots for indoor decoration.

Most species have heart-shaped grey-green to blue-green leaves, some are lobed, and some are variegated often featuring attractive, marbled, silvery patterns. The flowers, held above the foliage on long stems, are nodding downward-facing blooms

with reflexed petals. Cyclamens are long flowering plants - usually from autumn through winter and into spring. The flowers come in a rich tapestry of colours ranging from white, to pink, red and mauve. Some are perfumed. Pink, purple or white flowers tend to be fragrant, while the bold red varieties have less scent.

In the garden, for best results, plant cyclamens in dappled shade and in soil that allows good drainage, as they don't tolerate prolonged cold wet conditions. Grit and fibrous compost may be added to improve the soil condition, and tubers should be planted on or near the surface so that the plants will be less prone to developing rot.

A potted florist's cyclamen makes a great gift, but is often thought of as a 'one-season' throwaway plant. In fact, if it is well cared for, it can grow and bloom for quite a few seasons.

Correct temperature is a good start. In nature, cyclamens grow in cool, humid environments. They do not like warmth. If kept indoors, they should be kept in a well-lit room, free from heating. Alternatively, they can be kept outside on a well-lit balcony or verandah protected from the sun, or under a heavy foliage tree or a pergola.

The next step is to make sure that they are properly watered. Cyclamens are sensitive to both over and under watering. Make sure the pots have excellent drainage with a soil that holds water well. Water only when the soil is dry to the touch but don't wait until such signs as droopy leaves and flowers. When water, do it from below the leaves as water on the stems and leaves can cause them to rot.

Next comes fertilizing. Do it once every one to two months with water-soluble fertilizer mixed at half strength. Too much fertilizer can affect the plant's ability to re bloom.

Cyclamen are plants that spend part of the year in growth, and part of the year in a dormant state. During the dormant period (summer) they remain in the form of a subterranean tuber, which is in fact a swollen root. It looks very much like they are dying, as their leaves turn yellow and fall off. In fact, they are not dead; they are just sleeping. (Hardy cyclamens planted outdoors go through this process naturally and generally do not need extra care). When they go fully dormant depends on their species and their growing conditions. If they are houseplants and the heat is kept high, they'll go out more quickly. On the other hand, some don't ever appear to go fully dormant. Once you see the signs that the leaves are dying (late spring), stop watering and allow the plant to die (summer). Flowers that are finished should never be cut off, instead, remove both flowers and stems by gently twisting off at the base and pulling them away from the main bulb. Place the pot in a cool, somewhat dark place. When the dormant period is over (autumn) and you notice some leaf growth, bring it out of storage and start to water it well, make sure to drain any excess water away. Check that the tuber has not outgrown the pot. The tuber should sit so that its top emerges from the surface of the potting mix. It needs to be kept on the dry side, when water, try not to water over it, do it carefully around the side of the pot. Now, sit back and enjoy, your plant is ready to re bloom!

All parts of cyclamen are inedible, however, the tubers are suitable for use as pig fodder, giving rise to the common name of sowbread. A favourite food for pigs, however, their juice is said to be poisonous to fish.

Medicinally, the part of the plant used is the tuberous rootstock, picked when the plant is in flower. A decoction of the dried tuber is used for dropsy, mucous congestion, colds, flatulence, and intestinal worms. The powder is used to help heal purulent wounds. An ointment, made from the fresh tuber is good against serpent's bite.

Facts or old wives' tales: It is said that cyclamen is such a potent aid to childbirth that it is dangerous for pregnant women even to step over it. If she wears it on herself, it speeds up delivery. *Cyclamen hederifolium* is the species most associated with love spell. Small cakes made of the roasted tuber are said to cause the one who eats them to fall violently in love with the one who bakes them. Added to wine, it ensures the drinker would be thoroughly drunk.

