My first encounter with cyclamen was years ago when a friend brought a potted plant to a house-warming party. It was a truly outstanding specimen of florist’s cyclamen (Cyclamen persicum). Its fragrant, carmine-red flowers were held aloft on beet-red stems and looked like butterflies coming to land on the leaves. The leaves themselves were almost as attractive as the blooms. They were heart-shaped and dark green, handsomely marked with silver. Since then, florist’s cyclamen has become a permanent element of my house decor.

My small cyclamen world expanded wildly when once in February I spotted a few clumps of tiny, pink-blooming cyclamen in my friend’s garden. I soon learned that the genus contains about two dozen charming species (and many more cultivars) that bear a collective name: hardy cyclamen or, occasionally, garden cyclamen. They look like diminutive versions of the showy florist’s pot plants. The main difference (other than size) is hardiness. Some of these miniature cyclamen can thrive in zone 5, a few prefer warmer zones 6 and 7, while tender florist’s cyclamen is strictly a house plant.
The main attraction of hardy cyclamen is long-lasting, nodding blooms gracefully carried on leafless stalks above the foliage. The flower color varies and includes white and all imaginable shades of pink, purple and red. The forms with white flowers tend to be more vigorous. Some species such as Cyprus cyclamen (C. cyprium) or African cyclamen (C. africanum) have violet-scented blossoms. Although violet fragrance is the most common, there are exceptions. Lebanese cyclamen (C. libanoticum) have a musky scent, while cyclamen from southern Turkey (C. pseudibericum) have a spicy, peppery fragrance.
Cyclamen flowers are unquestionably beautiful, although their form is bizarre. The blooms feature four or five reflexed petals fused in a short tube that is usually marked with a darker color. The roundish or triangular petals are sometimes strangely twisted. The unusual cyclamen blossoms resemble badminton shuttlecocks and sometimes they are compared to propellers or even rockets. After the flower is pollinated, the flower stalk coils upon itself over and over, eventually looking like a spring. This bizarre behavior is fun to observe, but it serves the important purpose of safely transporting the seed to the soil level.

Hardy cyclamen are also valued for their handsome foliage, which comes in a wide range of shapes, even within a single species. Their leaves resemble kidney beans, hearts, or ivy foliage. Some are rounded and some are angular. Most species have attractive silver variegation patterns on the dark green leaf background. The silver markings appear as blotches, flecks or diamond- and heart-shaped patterns. Sometimes the marks resemble a Christmas tree or a spear head. A few plants have leaves that are entirely silver, such as ‘Tilebarn Anne’, the cultivar of the marvelous hardy cyclamen (C. mirabile).
Most hardy cyclamen prefer a site in partial shade with very well-drained, rich soil. They are well suited for a woodland area or shady rockery. Cyclamen enjoy water while actively growing and blooming, but prefer dry conditions during their summer dormancy period when water consumption is minimal. This is an adaptation from their native Mediterranean climate, with hot dry summers and cool wet winters with few frosts. Garden cyclamen are relatively pest and disease free. Some insects such as aphids, weevils or thrips may nibble on them, but they rarely cause serious damage.

As they grow, cyclamen form round tubers located shallowly beneath the surface of the soil or, in some cases, on top of it. The tubers widen with age, and old ones can reach the size of a dinner plate. Their life expectancy varies from 20 to even 100 years, making them wonderful value. Unfortunately, they don’t produce offsets (baby tubers), so seed is the only method of propagation. However, healthy cyclamen are prolific self-seeders. It takes about two or three years for a young plant to mature and bloom.
Bridging the Seasons with Cyclamen

Fall cyclamen (*C. hederifolium*), which appear in late summer, are both vigorous and undemanding. Their exquisite, usually rose-pink flowers are followed by ivy-shaped leaves with grey and bronze markings, hence the common name, the ivy-leaf hardy cyclamen. There are also some brilliant white cultivars such as ‘Album’ or ‘Sweetheart™ Splash’. These easy-to-grow fall cyclamen form low clumps and remain evergreen for the winter, going dormant before spring ends.

Later in fall, the tiny and delicate Turkish cyclamen (*C. cilicium*) appear. They are tender plants with pale pink or white flowers that have a honey-like fragrance. The handsome, heart-shaped, distinctively marked foliage is a bonus. These plants can be accompanied by another fragrant Turkish immigrant (*C. mirabile*), named after the red coloration of the young leaves. Like the ivy-leaf cyclamen, it goes dormant in late spring. For white-bloom admirers, there is the petite cyclamen (*C. intaminatum*), which bears white flowers with gray veins all through October. It is one of the smallest cyclamen and is usually grown as a container plant.

As soon as fall cyclamen blooms start fading, winter cyclamen (*C. coum*) arrive. In this common species, flowers appear after foliage fully develops. Blossoms come in a range of colors, from pure white through all shades of pink to vivid carmine. Another attractive feature is handsome foliage that is either solid dark green or generously marked with silver. The decorative, rounded leaves continue their display as late as early summer.
The foliage of fall and winter cyclamen may still be present when spring cyclamen (\textit{C. repandum}) appear. They bring fragrant, magenta pink flowers often with a darker nose and foliage spotted with gray-green. They can be accompanied by another spring-blooming cyclamen (\textit{C. creticum}). Their sweetly scented, slender flowers come in more subtle colors from pure white to pale pink. Their toothed, gray-green leaves are heart-shaped and splashed with silver markings.

But the real crescendo of this blooming succession belongs to summer cyclamen (\textit{C. purpurascens}). Although their foliage is not as striking as their cousins’, it stays year-round. The fragrant flowers range in color from lilac to rich purple red and are on display from June to September. Then the ivy-leaved cyclamen can take over.

Lovely garden cyclamen pack a lot of interest and beauty into their small stature. There are not many plants that can bridge the seasons as successfully as garden cyclamen, provided you live in a mild climatic zone. With a diverse collection and careful planning, you can enjoy their exquisite flowers year-round. And even when the blooms fade, the stunning, intricately patterned leaves stay for months. Will you find a place for these miniature season-bridging plants in your garden?

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