Caring for indoor cyclamen

Cyclamen, both potted for the house and growing in the garden, add a welcome burst of colour at this time of year.

It's gloomy outside at the moment and so all the more reason to make inside as cheerful as possible. I think the small-flowered, indoor cyclamen are as pretty as anything you'll find in a pot at this time of year and they're cheap.

I've just been to my local farm shop and bought some cyclamen for £2.50 each, an intense range of colours from 'Charles de Mills' rose-pink, to wine-crimson and a bright, rich red.

Having a range of similar colours (contrast built in), looks better than perfectly matched plants - wonderful running down the middle of a table and spread around window ledges.

Cyclamen give you intense, stained-glass colour until you can start to pick decent bunches of flowers from the garden in about a month.

The small-flowered varieties of Cyclamen persicum (or so called ‘florist's’ forms) come in white, crimson or magenta and are in a different league to the large-flowered, large-leaved brigade, which feel rubbery, overfed and coarse in comparison.

The scale of the mini ones feels right at this time of year and fits with their hardy cousins, Cyclamen coum, as well as snowdrops and aconites beginning to poke their way up into flower in the garden.

Displaying indoor cyclamen

- Don't just buy and plonk your indoor cyclamen - they're worth the effort of a bit of doctoring. The plastic pots they come in don't do these winter-flowering tubers justice, so plant them up in a brightly coloured bowl or something sparkly and shiny.
- Try not to disturb the roots - you're doing this for aesthetic reasons only - planting them into a loam-based compost with added grit and a handful of peat.
- You can use a soil-less compost, but it makes watering more difficult, especially at the end of the dormant period when you want it to take up moisture again.
- Gently firm the roots into the new pot or bowl and cover the compost with dried leaves or an emerald-green cushion of bun moss. That's how they'd look in the wild and it's always a good aim with houseplants to recreate this as closely as possible.
- Then spread the flowers out from the base. They tend to clump together, but teased out gently and evenly between the leaves, the flowers look lighter and more elegant.

Cyclamen care

- One of the great things about indoor cyclamen is if (like me), you are a bit hit and miss with your house plant care, they are pretty easy and reliable, looking good for six to eight weeks in our cold house.
- They're happy at room temperature (about 55F/13C), but shouldn't get too hot. Find them a light position, without too much direct sunlight.
- In the wild, Cyclamen persicum grows in deciduous woods, or you might find it more out in the open, with its tuber hidden under rocks and just the leaves and flowers poking into the light.
Too much heat in a sunny window will encourage early dormancy, while growing in light, but cool conditions may see them continue to flower into mid-May.

I have mine on east and north-facing window ledges, bringing them out more prominently onto our main dining table as and when I want them, but putting them back in between times.

Cyclamen don't like freezing temperatures (don't let them fall below 50F/10C), so on frosty nights I try to remember to bring them into the room.

As far as watering goes, they don't like much - the worst thing is a constant dribble of water. Keep them moist, but not dripping wet.

Once a week I sit the pots in a tray of half an inch of water and leave them overnight. Then the whole root ball gets a good drink and the compost rehydrates. I then drain them and leave them for another week or so without water.

If water collects in the base of the saucer or pot-holder, tip it out and don't water again until the compost feels fairly dry. Dead head and remove any dead or dying leaves with a sharp tug to the stem.

Follow the life cycle

_Cyclamen persicum_ are Mediterranean and follow the common pattern of coming into growth in the autumn, growing through the winter and spring and then going dormant while there is no rain and intense sun in the summer.

To help recreate conditions as similar as possible to their native environment, stop watering when they stop flowering and let the leaves go yellow and wither.

This is usually in April, but could be a few weeks later. Then put them somewhere cool and dry (but not totally dry as the compost is then tricky to rehydrate), for the summer.

If you keep them too moist in the dormant months, you may lose your tuber to rot. While plants are dormant, repot them into a slightly larger pot, teasing out the roots.

You can store them outside in the summer, but _Cyclamen persicum_ are not hardy, so bring them into the house again before the frosts begin.

In September (or when you see regrowth), start watering again. Soak the pot well. If no growth shows when you water it, wait for shoots to appear before watering again.

In the right cool place with gentle watering, they should be in flower again soon after Christmas and will get bigger and better each year.

Small-flowered indoor _Cyclamen persicum_ varieties have now made me realise I don't have nearly enough of the hardy garden _Cyclamen coum_ at Perch Hill for this time of year.

This looks best in carpets as big as you can throw them, almost as lovely in leaf through the autumn as it is in flower now.

My favourites are the deepest magenta colour forms which look good growing outside or arranged inside in a small glass with snowdrops or a few early primroses.