

HOME & GARDEN

Succumb to beauty of cyclamen, camellias

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When I went into the florist's to buy my gardenia plant a couple of weeks ago I succumbed to temptation and also bought a miniature cyclamen in full bloom and a very young camellia adorned with two fat buds.

The florist explained that it is only recently that he has been able to sell these beautiful flowering plants because they require very cool temperatures. Until the fuel crunch, houses were too hot to permit them to thrive. It's a different story now, of course. The temperature in my sitting room often goes down to 40 and is rarely over 70 during the day.

The cyclamen looks very fragile, with its pale flowers, usually, pink or white, perched atop the most delicate of stems, but in fact it is quite a sturdy plant. The mountainous regions of Iran, where the days are bright and cool and the nights are cold, are the cyclamen's native habitat. If you provide the plant with a cool room where the temperature drops at least 10 degrees at night and a bright or sunny window, the plant will thrive.

It is important to water the cyclamen carefully. If you buy a plant in full bloom you will notice that it is growing from partially exposed corms. These corms can rot, and the plant will be destroyed if they get waterlogged. You can prevent this from happening by watering very carefully around the edges of the pot.

While the plant is in bloom, which could be from October

through March, it should be fertilized every other week.

After blooming, the cyclamen needs a resting period. Reduce the watering substantially and allow the soil to dry between waterings. It will not need as much light either. If you wish, you can put the plant outdoors during the summer in a shady spot. It will lose most of its foliage, but don't worry.

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In the autumn the corms can be repotted. Use a slightly larger pot and commercial potting soil. The important thing is to remember not to plant the corm any deeper than it was originally. Each year the corm will be a little bigger, and

BETWEEN THE ROWS

each year a little more of it will be exposed above the soil. By taking care of the corms, you can bring the plant back into bloom for many years.

Cyclamen can also be planted from seed. It is not difficult, but it does require patience. If you plant seeds one summer the plant will not bloom the first winter; you will have to wait until it is about 18 months old.

James Crockett, in his book "Crockett's Indoor Gardening," gives these directions:

"I put just one seed into single peat pellets and set the pellets into total darkness for 40 days. As the seeds sprout, towards the end of that period, I move them into bright light ... Make sure they're moist. When the roots begin to show along the outside of the peat pellets, I move them, pellets and all, to individual 3-inch pots, taking care not to set them in any deeper than they had been growing."

Camellias are a romantic flower. The bushes grow rampant outdoors down south, but in our climate the best we can hope for is a small bush that will need to spend the winters indoors, when it will be covered with delicate, many petalled flowers.

Like the cyclamen, camellias prefer cool temperatures

and a fair amount of humidity. Be sure to keep the soil moist. They do not need as much light as cyclamen; an east window will be fine or a window where the sunlight can be filtered through a sheer curtain.

One of the tricks to growing camellias is to keep the potting soil very acid, with a PH between 4 and 5. If the soil is too sweet, the handsome evergreen foliage will turn yellow, and each pale leaf will be marked by dark green veins. You can lower the PH of the potting soil by watering it with an iron chelate solution. Most garden centers sell it in a soluble form for houseplants.

Camellias will start blooming when they are very young, and they will continue to bloom for many years. Although they can grow to be very large, it is best to keep them at a manageable size, perhaps three feet tall, by careful pruning and an occasional root pruning. They will need to be fertilized during their blooming period — six weeks during the winter — and cottonseed meal is particularly beneficial.

Occasionally they will need to be repotted, and this should be done after the plant has done blooming and just before new growth starts.

Flowers are not just for the hot days of summer. We need them during the frosty days of deep winter to bring us cheer. The pale blooms also remind me that winter does end and that soon the whole garden will be in bloom again.