

Cyclamen as a Holiday Plant

Donna Tatting, one of our Chisago County Master Gardeners, recently conducted a class on Holiday Gifts. One of the plants that you may give or receive is a Cyclamen plant. Cyclamen is a Mediterranean plant. In nature it goes dormant during the summer months. It comes into growth as cooler, damper weather starts. It flowers in autumn, winter or spring, and goes dormant again as the summer becomes warm. Cyclamens grow from tubers that are round and rather flat. The tubers are the storage organs that keep the plants alive during their summer dormancy.

When choosing a Cyclamen, be sure to select one with only a few flowers open. The flower stems should stand straight up, and there should be lots of buds tucked underneath the foliage that will develop and bloom later.

If you have just received a Cyclamen, it's important to keep it cool and to water it correctly, making sure not to under or over water. To prevent disease problems, it is a good idea to maintain good air movement around the plant.

From late autumn to early spring, provide your plant with as much light as possible. Sunburn is usually not an issue this time of year, although you may want to avoid placing the plant directly in front of a south-facing window.

Aim for temperatures between 40 and 50 degrees at night and day temperatures less than 68 degrees. A Cyclamen will not do well in a house heated much above 70 degrees, with the dry atmosphere that goes with it. If you are unable to provide cool enough conditions, the plant will survive for a time, but eventually it will develop yellow foliage and its blooming time may be cut short. It will probably tolerate a less than ideal location for a day or two as long as you return it to a better place shortly afterwards. The plant will tolerate indoor conditions even better if you move it to a cool spot at night. Make sure to provide as much light as possible in its daytime location.

Watering incorrectly can cause many problems, especially if you water too much. Always wait until the soil surface feels dry before you water, but don't wait until the plant becomes limp. Do not water the center of the plant or the tuber may rot. A Cyclamen prefers to receive a good soaking, then dry out partially before receiving a good soaking again. Allow the plant to drain over a sink or empty the water collecting tray beneath the container after a few minutes.

Fertilize your Cyclamen with a water-soluble fertilizer recommended for use on indoor plants, mixed half strength. Apply it every 3 to 4 weeks, starting about a month after you receive the plant. Overfeeding is more likely to produce foliage than flowers.

When the plant stops blooming, its leaves will begin to turn yellow and it will enter a dormant state. Most people discard the plant at that point. However, you may be able to force it to bloom again. Stop watering when the leaves turn yellow and wither. Keep the pot in a cool place, if possible, and allow the soil to become dry. It may be placed outdoors during the summer in a location where rainfall won't reach it and out of direct sunlight. Once all the leaves have dried, a process that could take up to two months, the tubers may be repotted into a container that is one inch larger in diameter than the old pot. This is usually necessary only every two years. Use a packaged, peaty soil mixture. The top half of the tuber should protrude above the soil line to assure adequate drainage and avoid tuber rot. Do not water as this could trigger new growth prematurely.

In the fall when new leaves start to grow, water the soil thoroughly. If you have trouble getting the potting soil to take up water, add a couple drops of hand dish-washing detergent to the water. This will not harm the plant, but will act as a wetting agent. If the new growth hasn't occurred by late October, you can go ahead and water it, as long as the tubers are still plump and hard. Wait for shoots to appear and the soil to become dryish, then water thoroughly again.

The amount of time it will take is uncertain, but it should rebloom. However, it may not be as spectacular as it was the first time. Along with Donna Tatting, parts of this article were taken from a brief by Jean Galligan, a Horticultural Technician at the University of Minnesota.

Submitted by Jerry Vitalis
Chisago County Master Gardener