

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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The ground under large conifers and deciduous trees can be challenging to landscape. Lawn grasses often refuse to grow there, and many other plants are unable to tolerate the combination of shade, dry soil, and competition with tree roots. Luckily, there are some plants that withstand these conditions, and among them are the hardy cyclamen.

Cyclamen are members of the primrose family that grow from tubers. Native to the Mediterranean and areas of central and southern Europe, the Middle East, western Asia and northern Africa, cyclamen grow in habitats that range from scrubland and rocky hillsides to woodlands and alpine meadows.

The familiar houseplants called florists' cyclamen are selections of the species *C. persicum*. These tender plants don't tolerate frosty weather, but some of their hardier relatives thrive outdoors in the Pacific Northwest.

Two species, ivyleaf cyclamen (*C. hederifolium*; previously called *C. neapolitanum*) and Persian violet cyclamen (*C. coum*), adapt so well to our climate that they have earned places in the Great Plant Picks collection. The Great Plant Picks program evaluates plants and selects those considered outstanding choices for Pacific Northwest Gardens. The program is administered by the Elisabeth Carey Miller Botanical Garden in Seattle.

Ivyleaf cyclamen is considered the hardiest, able to survive temperatures as low as -19 degrees F. The plants form compact clumps four to six inches high and up to 18 inches wide. Nodding pink or white flowers appear from August to October, their five twisted petals flexing back at the base. After flowers fade, the stalks descend in a coil to the ground to drop the seeds, which sometimes germinate, slowly spreading plants to the surrounding area.

The ivy-shaped leaves come up after flowers emerge, or at the same time. The foliage may be solid green or silver, or it may display an intricate pattern of silver, gray or cream on green. By late spring, the foliage dies down and the plant becomes dormant for the summer. Cyclamen tubers need dry soil during dormancy, a period that coincides with the season of meager rainfall in the Pacific Northwest. Since established hardy cyclamen plants don't need supplemental water in summer, they're good candidates for low-water-use gardens.

Ivyleaf cyclamen tolerates full sun to partial shade, but tends to produce more flowers when situated in sunnier spots. It requires well-drained soil, and performs well in rock gardens or in filtered shade under trees and shrubs. Loose, gritty soils with incorporated leaf litter are ideal.

Plant ivyleaf cyclamen tubers during the summer dormant period, June to August. Place tubers about six to ten inches apart and cover them with ½ inch of soil or grit. Mice and squirrels sometimes dig up young tubers, so protect new plantings if these animals visit your garden.

Persian violet cyclamen blooms from December to March. The flowers, similar in form to those of the ivyleaf cyclamen, appear in shades of deep magenta, pink or white. Rounded or heart-shaped leaves emerge with the flowers; foliage may be dark green, silver, or patterned.

The site and soil requirements and cultural methods are similar to those of the ivyleaf cyclamen. Persian violet cyclamen can handle the deep shade under evergreen conifers and the dry soil around maple roots, but will also grow in full sun. Ants sometimes carry and distribute the seeds, attracted to a sugary substance on the seed coat.

There are several other cyclamen species that are hardy in our climate, but may need more care to thrive here. *C. purpurascens* blooms from June to September, and some forms have fragrant flowers. This species doesn't have a dormancy period, and therefore needs moisture year-round. It requires partial to full shade, and soil that is well-drained, alkaline, gritty, and rich in composted leaves. *C. repandum* blooms from late spring to early summer. It's a woodland plant that likes shady, moist spots with well-drained, leaf-rich soil.

It's possible to propagate hardy cyclamen from seed, but the process can be challenging and slow. For more information on propagation or other aspects of cyclamen culture, visit the Web site of The Cyclamen Society at www.cyclamen.org. The site also lists a few mail order sources for plants and seeds in the U.S.

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