

HARDY CYCLAMEN

With their delicate flowers and patterned foliage, cyclamens are a welcome sight in February when so little else is in flower and a succession of species can provide colour from September to March

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PHOTOGRAPHS JASON INGRAM

Cyclamen coum 'Roseum'

Its official name of *Cyclamen coum* subsp. *coum* f. *coum* 'Roseum', is a long name for such a delicate plant. Its pale-pink flowers, held above small, rounded leaves, appear in December and last until March. 10cm. RHS H4†.

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French nursery rhyme announces that summer is over when the meadows fill with colchicums. In my garden I notice the change into autumn not from colchicums or autumn's leaf changing colours but from the pink or white flowers of cyclamen that begin to appear under shrubs, in the short grass and hugging the base of trees. Long lived, undemanding and with a resilience masked by the delicacy of their flowers, *Cyclamen* are indispensable. From September onwards there are species of hardy cyclamen that will flower in relay until March.

The first to flower and the most widely grown is *Cyclamen hederifolium*, which is widespread in deciduous woodlands across a swathe of southern Europe and on Mediterranean islands. The plant is a tuber that remains dormant throughout the summer to be woken by the drop in temperature and the start of the autumn rains. The flowers appear first, with tight buds unfurling to pink, white, sometimes magenta petals that sweep backwards, the flower nodding downwards to protect its pollen from rain. The leaves appear soon afterwards in a wide variety of shapes and patterns: rounded, heart-shaped or ivy-like (*hederifolium* means 'ivy-leaved'); smooth, crimped or toothed margins; from plain green or silver to delicately patterned in grey or pewter and often with purplish undersides.

There are other species that flower alongside *C. hederifolium* in the autumn. *C. mirabile* has sweetly perfumed flowers whose pale-pink petals have an upward twist. The leaves are typically heavily marbled with a silvery frosting. It is very similar to *C. cilicium*, blooming at the same time, which has flowers that smell deliciously of honey. It is not as hardy as other species but will grow in sheltered gardens not prone to heavy frosts.

As *C. hederifolium* signals the slow wind down to winter so *C. coum* heralds the start of the gardening year with its first flowers pushing open around Christmas and then appearing sporadically until March. Ideally, it prefers slightly richer soils than its earlier-flowering cousin but is otherwise as stalwart. The flowers encompass the same colour range of pinks, magentas and white and there are few sights more cheering than their sparkling flowers shining through a dour February day.

Like *C. hederifolium*, *C. coum* produces seedlings with a lot of variation in the foliage, which can be a delight in the garden but causes headaches for nurserymen. *C. coum* Pewter Group includes plants with leaves with a matt pewter sheen but I have often seen plants under that name with foliage that ranges from deep green to bright silver. If you are fussy about the look of your cyclamen buy them when you can see the leaves and flowers.

Other species of spring-flowering cyclamen tend not to be as robust as *C. coum*. *C. pseudibericum* has large magenta petals and smells of violets but will not thrive in cold, wet gardens. If you garden in an area with mild winters and can provide it with shade, *C. repandum*, with perfumed, reddish-ink flowers and scalloped leaves, is a treasure.

Don't be tempted to grow *C. hederifolium* and *C. coum* together. It might sound like a good form of succession planting but *C. hederifolium* is much more vigorous and will soon overwhelm the *C. coum*. If your garden is large enough grow the two well apart, otherwise stick to one species. In my garden *C. coum* romps around in short grass, and even seeds itself into paving cracks. Elsewhere, I have seen it planted in borders among *Sternbergia lutea* and the autumn crocus, *Crocus speciosus*. In the wild *C. coum* grows among primulas and hellebores, which is always a sign that a plant combination will triumph in the garden. Wherever you plant them, cyclamen will insist on seeding themselves into places they prefer. Leave them to find their own setting. I have learned that where they are happiest is where they are most beautiful. □

• Author John Hoyland is a plantsman and garden writer. His recommendations for hardy cyclamen continue over the next five pages.

PLANT PROFILE

What A genus of about 20 tuberous perennials grown for their pink and white flowers that appear at a time when few other plants are flowering.

Origins Most cyclamen are found around the Mediterranean and across southern France, Italy, Greece and into Turkey. Habitat ranges from deciduous woodlands to scrubland and rocky areas.

Season Some species flower from September to December, others from December to March.

Size Most grow to about 10cm tall. Established tubers can reach the size of a dinner plate and produce dozens of flowers.

Conditions In general, hardy cyclamen prefer poor, well-drained soils in full or part shade.

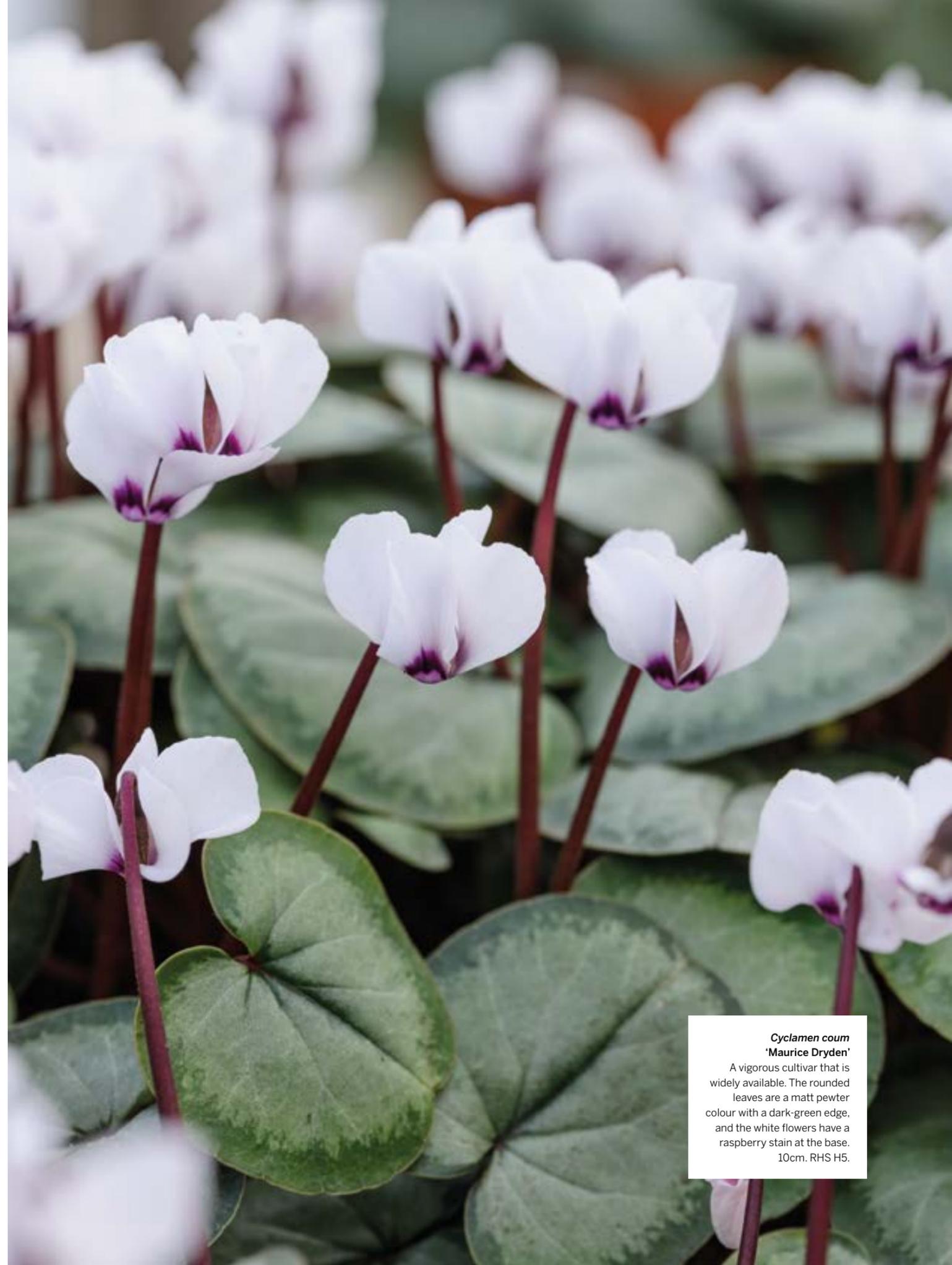
Hardiness RHS H4 and H5 USDA 7b-9a.

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.

†Hardiness ratings given where available.



Ashwood Nurseries
Under the direction of John Massey (above), Ashwood Nurseries, where the images for this feature were taken, has won dozens of Gold Medals for its cyclamen displays at RHS flower shows. As well as growing species cyclamen the nursery also selects seedlings of its most interesting plants, which can be seen at the nursery or in John's garden when it opens on 8 February. ashwoodnurseries.com



Cyclamen coum 'Maurice Dryden'

A vigorous cultivar that is widely available. The rounded leaves are a matt pewter colour with a dark-green edge, and the white flowers have a raspberry stain at the base.

10cm. RHS H5.



Cyclamen coum
'Tilebarn Graham'

Its deep-pink flowers each have a dark-magenta blotch at the base of the petals, and are held above pewter-coloured leaves. Although the flowers are on the small side they are produced in abundance. 10cm. RHS H4.



Cyclamen coum f.
albissimum 'Lake Effect'

A form with pure-white flowers that unusually have no colouring on the base of the petals. The leaves are deep green with a leathery texture and no markings. Flowers from late December. 10cm. RHS H4.



Cyclamen confusum

An autumn-flowering species that originates from the island of Crete. It's similar to *Cyclamen hederifolium* but has slightly larger flowers. The flowers have a delicious honey perfume and the leaves a glossy sheen. 10cm. RHS H4.



Cyclamen pseudibericum

A species that originates in Turkey with fragrant flowers. These appear later than *Cyclamen coum* – beginning in March and continuing right up until May. The foliage is mottled and emerges at the start of winter. 10cm. RHS H4.



Cyclamen mirabile

An autumn-flowering species with flowers that are usually pale pink in colour and that have a sweet scent. Its leaves are rounded, serrated and imprinted with a frosted pattern that resembles a maple leaf. 10cm. RHS H4.



Cyclamen coum

Silver Leaf
Attractive silver-grey foliage with a rounded shape and slightly serrated edge. The flowers are generally shell-pink, but deep-magenta to rose-pink shades and white forms do occur. 10cm. RHS H5.

Cultivation

Hardy cyclamen are easy to grow as long as you avoid heavy soils that are apt to get waterlogged. If you do have very wet soil it is probably best to grow them in pots or raised beds. They are at their happiest around the base of deciduous trees and large shrubs. These are areas that are cool and shady in the summer but light and moist during the autumn and winter.

Don't confuse hardy cyclamen with the florist's cyclamen that you see for sale during the winter. These are forms of a tender species, *C. persicum*, that have been cosseted throughout their lives and will not survive outdoors.

An important consideration when growing cyclamen is whether to buy them as dry tubers or as already rooted plants in pots. Potted plants are more expensive but will establish more quickly and flower immediately; tubers will take some time to establish and probably won't flower the first year after planting. Plant container-grown cyclamen at the same level as they are in their pot and plant tubers about 3cm to 4cm below the surface. If you are planting tubers, make sure that they are the correct way up. The flat or slightly indented face is the top.

Propagation

The sweeps of cyclamen that are seen in the wild are a testament to the nifty ways in which the genus has developed to ensure that its seed is distributed efficiently. Cyclamen seeds are held in capsules on the end of spring-like stems that unwind to deposit the seed as close to the ground as possible, increasing the chances of germination. Seed distribution is further assisted by ants, birds and small mammals. Attracted by the sweet coating covering the seeds, ants take away the seeds to a safe place, eat the sugars and leave the seed to germinate. Small birds that are attracted to the sweet treats eat them and then redistribute the seeds through their droppings.

The oft-quoted advice of collecting cyclamen seed and sprinkling it around has never worked for me. The expanse of cyclamen in my own garden have been produced by simply letting Nature do the work and (very occasionally) collecting and sowing seed of a species I wanted to encourage. Seed should be sown as soon as possible after it ripens in trays or shallow pans. I use John Innes seed compost with a small amount (about 10 per cent) of perlite and the same amount of leaf mould. The seed should be sown thinly and covered with about one centimetre of horticultural grit. Leave the containers in a shady place outside, keep the compost moist and wait. Germination is irregular, with some seedlings appearing after a couple of months and some waiting a year or so. Leave the young plants in the trays for a second year to develop a tuber and then plant out in the garden when they are dormant, roughly between May and August.

Where to see and buy

• **Ashwood Nurseries**

Ashwood Lower Lane,
Kingswinford, West
Midlands DY6 0AE.
Tel 01384 401996,
ashwoodnurseries.com

• **Cherubeer Gardens***

Higher Cherubeer, Dolton,
Winkleigh, Devon EX19 8PP.
Tel 01805 804265, ngs.co.uk
Open for NGS on 7, 14 and
22 February, 2-5pm.

• **Edrom Nurseries**

Coldingham, Eyemouth,
Berwickshire TD14 5TZ.
Tel 01890 771386,
edrom-nurseries.co.uk

• **Kevock Garden Plants**

Kevock Road, Lasswade,
Midlothian EH18 1HX.
Tel 0131 454 0660,
kevockgarden.co.uk

*National Collection holder