

Cyclamen Foliage

Bob Brown

Winter is a time when keen gardeners take an interest in minutiae they mightn't notice in high summer. Cyclamen are grown mainly for their flowers which chiefly bloom from autumn through to spring, but their wintergreen leaves are almost as important. Plant them and they almost always remain forever, particularly if they're planted under trees where the soil dries out during their dormant season in summer. Here they serve not only to furnish the ground in a difficult place but also to adorn it with their exquisitely patterned and coloured leaves at what might be an otherwise dead time of the year.

The most widely grown is *Cyclamen hederifolium* which naturalises wonderfully in gardens by self-seeding. It has good foliage and there are some superior forms such as 'Lysander' and silvered forms like 'Silver Cloud'. However, the very best-looking cyclamen foliage is linked to *Cyclamen graecum* (coming as you'd expect from Greece). These days with the help of genetic work this major species has been split into *C.maritimum* (formerly *Cyclamen graecum subsp.anatolicum*), *C.graecum subsp.candidum* and simply *C.graecum*. They're all exquisite having velvety-looking sheens which is something to do with the layering of air pockets within the leaf that produce the silvering, beaded pinky edges and bold designs. Sadly, many *C.graecum* are not so hardy but collections have been made from high altitudes and these plants have happily withstood winters like that of 2010. The hybridists at Ashwoods Nursery at Kingswinford will doubtless look to combining these hardiness genes with the best patterned foliage.

Keen amateurs grow some of the less tough forms in pots and if you are prepared to protect specimens in harsh cold you will not have to wait for the hybridists to work. Remember that any visit to your greenhouse in winter might be a great pleasure unless you've filled it with scruffy overwintering half-hardy salvias and pelargoniums. One of our group members is a bit of a collector and breeder of cyclamen too – particularly for foliage. I've visited his collection when I've needed bucking up in midwinter and the memory boosts my spirit for a few more weeks in the dull season.

The most famous winter-flowering species is *Cyclamen coum* which has bright dumpy flowers starting at Christmas and increasing to a peak in February. It's often plain green – which is fine – but look out for offers of patterned leaves like 'Ashwood Snowflake' or leaves which are all-over silver. Eventually these will self-seed into a wonderful foliage tapestry.



Cyclamen coum



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Cyclamen hederifolium