

# Hardy Cyclamen: Creating a Garden Understory

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In recent years, the notion of “mulching” with plants instead of shredded bark or leaves has taken root in the garden world. Designers such as David Culp (*The Layered Garden*, 2012) and Thomas Rainer (*Planting in a Post-Wild World*, 2015) recommend using groundcovers or low-growing perennials to blanket bare space in a bed and discourage weeds. Not only does this approach reduce the onerous and expensive task of annual mulching, it contributes to a pleasing, tiered look in the garden, which includes a lofty level of trees and tall shrubs, a mid-plane of bushes and perennials, and an understory of small flowers and foliage.



photo: North Carolina State University Raulston

Many low-growing plants, such as vinca, pachysandra, epimedium and wild ginger, can fulfill the understory function. However, a particular favorite among master gardeners is the delicate-looking but sturdy cyclamen. With glossy, heart-shaped foliage and flowers that range from white to deep pink, cyclamen bring a welcome touch of color to a shady bed.

A member of the Primulaceae family, cyclamen include a number of species. *C. hederifolium*, winter hardy in zones 5 to 9, is the most widespread and grows well in our area. It blooms in the early fall when the rains come. The plants are 4 to 6 inches tall and naturalize to carpet the ground, but this cyclamen is neither aggressive nor invasive. As its flowers fade, variegated leaves emerge and last into



*Cyclamen hederifolium*

the spring. The leaves then die back only to return the next fall. The plants are drought-hardy; in fact, they delight in dry summer weather. Although deer resistant, cyclamen may be bothered by spider mites, vine weevils, cyclamen mites or gray mold, but these rarely cause problems.

Cyclamen grow well in partial sun and need rich, moist, well-drained soil. The plant can be propagated by seed, division or separation, but it is usually sown as a tuber. Although expensive, hardy cyclamen can last for years.

When planting their tubers, sow cyclamen 2 inches below the soil surface in late summer or early fall.



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photo: Barbara H. Smith, ©2015 HGIC, Clemson

Cover the plants with a light mulch of shredded leaves or evergreen boughs for overwintering, but remove it as soon as the weather warms. Winter is the growing season for cyclamen, so that is when they need light and moisture. When you rake, take care not to damage the tuber tops

The future looks bright for hardy cyclamen. Breeders are working to develop a wider range of colors for the fall garden.

#### **References and Resources**

Hardy Cyclamen, Cornell University Home Gardening Flower Growing Guides

The Layered Garden, Culp, D. and Levine, A. Portland, Timber Press. 2012

The Cyclamen Society

Planting in a Post-Wild World, Rainer, T. and West, C. Portland, Timber Press. 2015

Cyclamen hederifolium & Silver Leaf photos: courtesy Plant Delights Nursery, Inc. [www.plantdelights.com](http://www.plantdelights.com)



*Cyclamen Silver Leaf*