



In the Pink

Hardy cyclamen flourish when nothing else grows.

It happens every year. Just when it seems that summer will last forever, there appears in the garden a small reminder that it won't. It's a little like the occasional creak in a joint that reminds us of our own mortality, although more welcome. The new arrival in the garden is *Cyclamen hederifolium*. Right now there are just a few isolated flowers, emerging from dust-dry ground. By the end of August there will be hundreds more, to be followed later in the year by a ground-covering carpet of pretty, silver-marbled leaves that will last all winter.

This easiest of the little hardy cyclamen is the first of several surprises in pink. Late August brings the imposing belladonna lily (*Amaryllis belladonna*), a slimmed-down, hardy version of the indoor amaryllis. By September there will be many kinds of colchicum. (Colchicum are often called autumn crocus because the flowers bear a superficial resemblance to crocuses. This is confusing because there are also true crocuses that bloom in fall.) Like cyclamen, colchicum and belladonna spring suddenly from bare ground without leaves, giving rise to names like naked boys, naked ladies and resurrection lily.

The dilemma with fall-blooming bulbs and corms is that they need space and light both in fall (so you can appreciate the flowers) and in spring, when the foliage is in full growth. As a result they don't mix well with perennials or over-vigorous ground cover plants, or even bulky annuals that may still going strong in August and September. On the other hand, the bulbs don't need much summer water, so they are perfectly adapted to yards that have unirrigated areas. Hardy cyclamen are easiest to accommodate, because they flourish among the roots of greedy trees (maples and birches, in my yard) where hardly anything else will grow. Rooty, shaded ground is inhospitable even to weeds, so a light layer of compost or shredded leaves is all it takes to prepare the ground for their arrival.

Belladonna lilies need sun, but as they bloom on two-foot stems they will do well enough in a carpet of verbena, or even a bed of catmint or lavender. Where drainage is good, they won't object to some irrigation. Colchicum are harder to place because their leaves are considerably taller than the flowers. You can plant them in an area of low ground cover like vinca (occasionally mown when it grows too thick), lamium or ajuga. Better still, put them in an area of rough

grass (along with wild iris and native bulbs, perhaps) and be sure you mow it in late July or early August. Well-established clumps can bloom for weeks. In spring, the leaves have plenty of time to ripen before the grass overtakes them.

"Ripen" is, of course, a euphemism for dying. Some people make an awful fuss about dying bulb foliage, and in the case of big-leafed colchicum they have a point. If you are impatient with daffodil or tulip leaves as they make their exit, colchicum may not be the plant for you. Even if you have some tolerance for withering leaves, you may consider rough grass or ground cover the ideal location for the common kinds of colchicum that get handed from neighbor to neighbor, while you reserve a few prominent spots in the garden for more exciting varieties.

A few of these have flowers with a strange, checker-board pattern that botanists call tessellation. There is some of this pattern in 'Violet Queen.' Others emerge almost without color, then gradually turn rose pink or close to purple. It takes sun to bring out the strongest coloring. Colchicum 'Giant' is a strong, reliable variety with large, cupped flowers in lavender pink. Double-flowered 'Waterlily' is strangely attractive, with many narrow petals that are closer to lilac-purple.

In spite of words like lilac and violet in catalog descriptions, colchicum are mostly pinkish. So what if pink is not your color? There are a few white colchicum. The most beautiful is *C. speciosum* 'Album,' but it increases slowly and is difficult to find. *C. autumnale* has a pretty, heavy-blooming white variety with small flowers only 4 inches high. It is said to have a double-flowered white variant, but I have never seen it. Later in fall come true crocus, some of which are definitely bluish, but they are more of a challenge to grow well in our rainy climate. And there's a cheery yellow crocus look-alike, *Sternbergia lutea*, that is easy if you can find it a spot with fast drainage and plenty of fall and winter sun.

It is a little late to order colchicum from mail-order catalogs, but you will find the big, shiny brown corms at some garden centers and farmers' markets. Plant them with only an inch of soil over them, in ground that won't be water-logged in winter. **EW**

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