

Banishing Winter Blues with Warm Summer Hues

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When winter has shrouded our world with a blanket of white, winter blues can be cast aside with the brilliant colours of flowering plants. Now is the time to enrich your home with a profusion of blooms. Gravitate towards warm colours of yellow, orange and red that can spark memories of spring and summer months. A variety of flowers available at this time of year will bloom continuously through the winter months. Three of these seasonal beauties are Poinsettias, Cyclamens and Amaryllis.



Poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*)

Today, more than 100 varieties of Poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) are commercially grown, and each year more are introduced to markets in our area. Along with the traditional red, one can find white, pink, plum and burgundy colours as well as speckled, marbled and bi-coloured. They are normally sold in 4, 6, 8, 10 and 12 inch pots; the less exotic poinsettias are usually reasonably priced. Poinsettias are easy to care for and will thrive if not over watered. In the spring, after the last threat of frost, they can be placed or planted outdoors to add texture to the garden. To re-establish colour indoors in the fall, you will need to keep the plant in complete darkness for a minimum of 12 hours every day for approximately 2 months. Keep your plant moist and well fed during this period.

Cyclamen (*Cyclamen persicum*) also come in a range of different colours from pink, peach, rose, red, violet to white. Cyclamen are normally sold in 6 to 8 inch diameter shallow pots. The cost is slightly higher than for Poinsettias, but they are well worth the expenditure given their long flowering period and attractive leaf colour and markings. They will continue to bloom well into the spring at which time they

will start to enter a dormant state. Reduce water and sunlight and allow the plant to enter full dormancy. At this point, you can also plant this flower outside in a shaded area. In the fall, re-pot your plant to bring indoors, return to a sunny location and, like the poinsettia, keep the plant moist and fertilize monthly.

Amaryllis (*Amaryllis*) plants are normally purchased in bud or bloom at this time of year or in bulb kits. They come in a multitude of colours and are one of the most dramatic flowers to grow indoors. Amaryllis has a flowering time of approximately 3-5 weeks depending on the variety. They are reasonably priced given the superb beauty of the flower.

Amaryllis bulbs are easy to force. This can be a great fall or winter project to share with children or grandchildren. It doesn't take long for the green shoots to show and with the dramatic 12 to 24 inch growth, there is plenty of change to be seen weekly or bi-weekly.

First, look for bulbs that are large and firm with some roots at the base and no sign of leaf growth on top. At the same time look for a pot that is 6-7 inches in size. The bulbs perform best when they are crowded and you will only need about 1 inch of space around the sides of the bulb.

As opposed to bulbs such as Tulip, Hyacinth, Daffodil and Crocus, which require a cooling period of roughly 10 - 16 weeks, Amaryllis require no cooling period at all when first purchased. They are considered easy to grow; in 6 – 8 weeks you are rewarded with large trumpet shaped attractive blooms that last for weeks.

Use a potting mixture that is light and drains well. Pre-moisten the potting mixture and fill your pot 1/3 to ½ full. Place the bulb on top and then fill around the bulb leaving 1/3 exposed. You may want to consider staking the bulb at this time as flowers may become top heavy and late staking can damage roots. Pat the soil down and water well.

Place your potted bulb in a warm location with direct sunlight. Heat is necessary to stimulate growth (temperatures between 18 – 25C). Water when the soil becomes dry, making sure not to over water as this may cause your bulb to rot. You should see growth in 2 – 8 weeks. Rotate your plant every few days and fertilize during this growth period with 20-20-20 once a month. A liquid soluble fertilizer would be best. The stem will appear first and grow at a rapid rate. When the flowers start to develop, move the plant to a cooler location with less sunlight. This will extend the flowering time and prevent flower colour from fading. Now you have a strong healthy plant with great colourful blooms for all to enjoy.

Your Amaryllis will flower again if you remove the old flower stems. Continue to feed and water your plant during the summer and in the fall the leaves will start to yellow. Cut the leaves back to within 2 inches of the top of the bulb. Store in a cool, dry location, and out of direct sunlight until you see signs of new growth. You may want to freshen the top inch of soil and then begin the process again.

This year I am purchasing miniature Amaryllis bulbs from a local company. The miniature variety, suitable to multiple plantings, has smaller bulbs which will grow to about 30-40cm (12-16") tall, give multiple blooms per stem and, best of all, will flower in 4 – 6 weeks.

Why not join me by purchasing one of these flowers or forcing a spring bulb? We can share stories in the spring on how we beat the winter blues with these warm and exotic flowers.

Lake Simcoe South Master Gardeners provide free gardening advice. Send your questions to our gardening hotline at lssmastergardeners@gmail.com