

## Tale of three Sisters

Sometimes it seems to me that the genus *Cyclamen* is like a large, extraordinarily gifted family. In such family any child that is attractive and intelligent will, tragically, always be compared with its more extravagant siblings and found wanting. Of course, if it was born into any other family it would have praise and attention heaped upon it. As an avid reader of books on *Cyclamen*, articles and general bulb or alpine books, I have noted that some "children" seem to have suffered through; unfair comparisons, outright criticism, damning by faint praise or simple lack of attention.

This piece speaks out for them and tries to redress the balance. To start with my judicial researches looked at the autumnal species.

*Cyclamen cypricum* seems to have had mixed reviews, many general books left it out possibly because of its hardiness. Roy Elliott in a chapter on Alpine Houses said "...next comes *Cyclamen cypricum*, not the loveliest of the race, and difficult to flower – but which carries us over until...(name withheld)" Ouch! I can imagine cypricum hiding in its bedroom for weeks after that. Chris Grey-Wilson however offers some encouragement in "Cyclamen, a guide for gardeners, horticulturists and botanists" (an absolute must for all members of this society I would think) by telling us it "*is a splendid plant when well grown*". But then he points out it is one of the least hardy species and that he doesn't find it that easy to grow. Oddly on the hardiness front, when I started re growing cyclamen about ten years ago, I lost many species in an unheated greenhouse during a particularly frosty period but *Cyclamen cypricum* E.S form came through untouched. I find that it is one of the species that sometimes takes a year off. That is it fails to come into growth for an entire year and then reappears the next year with a sort of sleepy air as if to say "*did I miss anything?*". Strangely it seems when this happens, that sometimes all of my plants of a particular species take the year off, even though they came from different sources, are of differing ages and in different locations in the greenhouse. Last year was cypricum's turn, but this year they are all back. I do find that it does not flower quite as freely as I would like but even so they seem to make quite a good show, with unmistakable white flowers (sometimes a pale pink) and a series of magenta markings at the auricles. It is very sweetly scented and I find it has a pleasing habit, some flowers open before the leaves but at its peak it usually presents itself well, with a mound of leaves and a central bunching of flowers. As to the leaves these vary, a single sowing gave me plants with plain olive leaves bar two lighter spots at the leaf apex to one with leaves a mixture mainly a sage green with darker markings. There is also E.S form, which stands for Elizabeth Strangman, which has leaves spotted and splashed with white, which is quite fun.

*Cyclamen africanum* has an unhappy fate, sometimes unaccountably it is the only plant not illustrated in a book or sometimes it is just plain ignored. Something a bit like an old style communist leader that gets quietly erased when they fall out of favour. Paranoia aside it seems to get much less column inches than perhaps it deserves. It gets more of a write up in reports of the *Cyclamen Society's* shows though. I think part of the problem is that it seems

so close to *hederifolium*, but *hederifolium* is so much more versatile and generally more flamboyant. *Africanum*'s twin is hardy, more variable and comes in several named forms (I have plants of *Cyclamen africanum album*, but wonder what they will turn out to be). The other problem is that there is confusion over what is and what isn't *africanum* with allegations that many of the plants in cultivation are in fact hybrids with *hederifolium*. My own plant of "africanum" does appear as a slightly bigger version of *hederifolium* but the petals are a little floppy, which detracts from its appearance. I do however have seedlings of the "genuine" plant from original seed collections in Algeria. One flowered this year and paradoxically appeared as a smaller, stiffer version of *hederifolium*. Very prim and proper with very broad mid green glossy leaves with four medium pink flowers, of a uniform size and height, it has considerable appeal. Most of my other plants from this sowing have similar leaves, while plants from JCA855 are equally distinct with greyish green arrow leaves, satisfactorily succulent with a horny tooth edge. A recent visit to Wisley revealed plants with mainly pale pink blooms on tall stems with one plant approximating to the miniature that I had flowered this year. Among the plants in the "For sale" frames I found a plant with a single deep rose pink flower unaccompanied by leaf (too late, it's gone now!)

An objective description of the "typical" *Cyclamen intaminatum* would hardly thrill. It would read something like, "small, dark plain leaves, with unscented, small off white flowers with grey veining". Even so as it matures you can end up with a dainty potful and a sowing from a single seedpod, planted in a shady trough has allowed it to show off a certain pixie charm outside. I have a few plants with patterned leaves but these seem much weaker which is a shame, just giving a few leaves and flowers after several years. Losses of this form seem to be quite high while the plain leaved form seems reasonably tough. I do have one unusual plant which I think appeared in the plunge material of my greenhouse. It seems to be a pale pink *intaminatum*, pale pink petals shading to a white nose with grey veining and patterned leaves rather large for *intaminatum*. It's vigour, coupled with it's appearance in the plunge material when I don't think any of the patterned *intaminatums* had set seed makes me wonder if it is a hybrid. It could be a cross between the two forms of *intaminatum*, or *intaminatum* x *cilicium* or *intaminatum* x *mirabile*. I was shown an almost identical plant by a local plantswoman so I wonder if other members have similar plants?

I hope this has done a little to even the scales of horticultural fairness and that now my own plants of *C.africanum*, *cypricum* and *intaminatum* will show their gratitude by increasing and flowering with an as yet unheard of exuberance.

Mark Griffiths, November 1999 (Published in the Alpine Garden Society journal)