The Flowers of Winter

By Maureen O’Connell

As I write this article on November 9, I still have some flowers in my garden that have escaped the past week’s chilling frosts. In the upper garden, David Austin’s Sharifa Asma hangs on with several fat buds, just waiting to open when I bring them into the warmth of the house. Mr. Lincoln has also defiantly set out one very large, bright, red bud. It also promises to unfold in the house. I am afraid that the hungry deer have stripped Julia Child of all of her leaves, while at her feet, the self-sown, hearty, pink Wave petunias are blooming as if it were July. My middle garden is more exposed to the elements, and the phlox ‘David,’ the dahlias, the salvia, the Moonbeam coreopsis, and all of the roses have turned in for the winter. My Lamb’s Ears still look wonderfully green, soft, and fuzzy; they often remain that way all winter. Nearer to the house, the two huge pink Knockout roses are still covered in hundreds of flowering buds—attention, brown thumb people, there is another reason why you should grow these roses. But, my garden and I know that my well-loved flowers are facing very soon their Last Hurrah for 2010. This does not mean that I shall not have flowers all winter. For the next several months, my garden will be in my house. For those who say that they have no success growing flowering plants indoors, throw that idea away. The key rule is to select plants that can adapt to your house’s environment; you don’t need a greenhouse to have flowers. Here is a list of five of my favorite flowering plants that can grow and thrive in an average house’s conditions, no matter what color your thumb is.

African Violet – Many people think of this plant as old-fashioned and grandmotherly. I suppose that every home at one time or another had a little purple one stuck in the corner of a windowsill. It would gather dust on its wooly leaves and maybe bloom once a year. Well, look again; there is a whole new world of African violets out there with a wide variety of flower forms and colors. Forget about the usual guidelines of care: careful watering (don’t let the water touch the leaves), high humidity, bright, but not direct light. More African violets are killed by overwatering than anything else. I have ten plants that bloom faithfully all year. I water them when the soil is dry; I fertilize them with African violet food whenever I water; I wash the leaves with a little dishwashing liquid when they look dusty, and they sit in on a table in full sun in the kitchen. They reward me with luscious pink, purple, white, lavender, and rose blooms all year. What more can you ask of one plant?

Begonias – You may consider begonias as summer outdoor plants, but many varieties make excellent houseplants that can bloom all winter in average house conditions. I find that the fibrous rooted types, like waxed-leaf, angel-wing, and hairy-leafed varieties are the most reliable repeat bloomers. I brought indoors a few weeks ago a very large pink angel-wing one. My only complaint is that its profuse blooming leaves many fallen flowers on the floor. That is a small price to pay for a super flowering plant.

Bromeliads – They are sometimes called urn plants, as they grow in rosettes of leaves that form a middle water-collecting cup. This member of the pineapple family likes bright light. They can be a little tricky to bring into bloom, but their flowers often last for weeks or months.

Clivia – If you have a brown or even black thumb, this plant is for you. If you often forget to water your plants, this one is for you. If you have a second home and would like to keep plants there, this one’s for you. It thrives on neglect; you would kill it with kindness. This amaryllis relative is grown from a bulb and it needs to be pot bound to flower. They can be a little hard to find in local garden centers; I buy mine from White Flower Farm. They only bloom once a year, in shades of peach, yellow, or orange, but their broad leaves are attractive year round. Their lily-shaped blooms last for several weeks. They are not cheap to buy. I thought the one I bought, *Clivia miniata* (called the perfect houseplant), was expensive at $52, but I noticed in White Flowers Farm’s fall catalog that they now offer Clivia Victorian Peach (10” terra-cotta pot) for $475. A decade of breeding for the best peach color, I guess, justifies its high price. If any of my readers buys one, let me know how you like it.

Orchids – Don’t tell me you can’t grow orchids in your house if you haven’t tried the phalaenopsis orchid, known as the Moth Orchid. This is the easiest, most reliable, and longest-blooming of orchids. I have five of them; three of them are five years old and have bloomed every year. I give them bright, indirect light, warm temperatures during the day, and cooler temperatures at night. I water them when the bark-like soil is a little dry, and I fertilize them and mist their sword-like leaves about once a week during their growing season. Buy yourself a present this week; buy an orchid.

Last week, I visited several garden centers in our area that offer houseplants. I found a huge selection of very healthy-looking, attractive flowering plants. Welcome flowers into your house this winter; all souls need a winter garden to carry us through the cold, gray days ahead.