

Cyclamen

Common Names: Cyclamen, sowbread

Botanical name: *Cyclamen*, Family: Primulaceae

Cyclamen have had many theories about their uses. Pliny the Elder's first-century *Natural History* stated that fishermen used the roots of the aristolochia, cyclamen, to poison fishes. The Renaissance botanist Nicolo Leoniceno disputed this in 1492 saying instead what Pliny meant was the wild European cyclamen. He also said that he had seen fishermen use the latter to kill fishes. Because there are several varieties of cyclamen, Pandolfo Collenuccio defended Pliny.

Before the science of botany developed, debates like that above were what kept scholars searching for answers to the claims of other scientists. During the Renaissance, the Doctrine of Signatures, popularized by Paracelsus said that plants were named because of their uses in science. Cyclamen's ear shaped leaf caused the plant to be used in curing earaches.

William Turner, an English botanist, warned that cyclamen "was such a potent aid to childbirth that it was dangerous for pregnant women even to step over cyclamen roots. Turner knew about childbirth. He complained that his living quarters were so crowded that 'I can not go to my booke for ye crying of childer and noyse yt is made in my chamber.' He wrote the first popular English herbal, published in 1551, in which called cyclamen "Sawesbread."

"Sowbread" was given to cyclamen because it was a food often fed pigs. The name "cyclamen" comes from the Greek *kyklos* (circle) and refers to the seed stalks, or pedicels, which after flowering curl up and ripen among the leaves. The Greek name for cyclamen was *chelonion* (tortoiseshell) because the tubers look like little turtles.

Wild European cyclamens are tiny in comparison to those we have today grown in greenhouses. These are the descendants of Persian cyclamen, which came to Britain in the 1650's, and are examples of freak gigantism that the Victorian plant breeders were able to exploit. Cyclamen make lovely houseplants and the Victorians claimed each could have as many as fifty to eighty blossoms. Amazing? Wild cyclamen will grow in America south of climatic zone 5 and will, if left alone, form brilliant clumps of color.

100 Flowers and How They got Their Names
by Diana Wells, Illustrated by Ippy Patterson

