

Newtown Road Cemetery Plant of the Month

Cyclamen (Cyclamen Hederifolium)



‘Looks like a flight of butterflies frozen for a single exquisite moment’. The writer Beverley Nichols was referring to a group of cyclamen.



This petite flowering plant grows well on the east side of the Cemetery where it favours the shady habitat under the trees. It is a tuberous perennial which dies down to its thick roots, or tubers, during summer dormancy and then regrows quickly to flower again in the autumn. The plant has increased and spread over the years and can now be found in several areas of the Cemetery

The 4-6 inch tall flowers have upswept petals in various shades of pink and sometimes a very pure white. ‘Hederifolium’ means that the green and silver patterned leaves resemble those of Ivy. The flower stem bends and coils when the fruit begins to form. The numerous seeds are contained in round pods and their dispersal is aided by the activity of ants. Its flowering period is associated with All Saints’ Day when sometimes the flowers may be placed on tombs, altars and burial grounds. They are symbolic of hope, strength and comfort in difficult times and often planted in cemeteries.

This group of plants should not be eaten as they can cause unpleasant and dangerous symptoms and they are also toxic to pets. However, they have been used medicinally in the past to treat a range of ailments including digestive problems, abscesses, colds and emotional imbalance. They are still currently used, after very many dilutions, as homeopathic remedies.

Apparently, squirrels are partial to the tuberous roots and the fact that pigs also liked to eat them gave rise to the old nicknames Swinebread and Sowbread. Horticulturists have developed many commercial versions of cyclamen; these may be much bigger and more colourful than the wild ones but they seriously lack the charm of those in the cemetery.

Joan Stacey

