

Ask a Master Gardener Article
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Title: Gift plants which will transition to the garden

What plants can I buy now that will look nice in the house during the winter, and may then be transplanted outdoors and look even better in my garden in the spring?

Most foliage house plants that you find at the nurseries are tropicals that cannot tolerate our Georgia winters. You do have a few choices of flowering shrubs and perennials that are sold as 'gift plants' in the cold season, though, that will be happy to thrive in your home until early spring planting.

Many experts suggest using potted hydrangea, azalea, calla lily, gerbera daisies, amaryllis and miniature roses. An arrangement which I find to be particularly attractive is to combine hydrangeas with a maiden hair fern, and trailing ivy. You use either variegated ivy or green according to your personal preference. The white in the variegated leaves provides contrast, and the maiden hair fern lightens up the heavy look of the hydrangea.

The Westfalen hydrangea, also called French or Bigleaf hydrangea, is readily available, and boasts lovely crimson flowers with white eyes in pompoms dotted around the bush. After planting Westfalen outdoors in partial shade, it behaves itself and stays at a compact 3 to 4 foot height.

Girard azaleas are the favorite amongst the nursery trade for their full growth, glossy evergreen leaves and range of colors available from white through fuchsia, crimson, orange and purple. Girards will go toward the front of the border when planted in the shade garden, as they top out at only 24" to 36" at maturity.

Calla lily grows in a clump, with long arrowhead shaped leaves emanating from the bulbs below the soil. Callas come in a range of colors, including purple, orange and the always favorite white - whose beauty earns its place in many a bridal bouquet as a cut flower. Once transplanted in your garden, Calla lilies will grow to about two or three feet high for the standards, and closer to 18 inches for the dwarf varieties. Callas love full sun, so place them

out away from trees or shade from the house.

For a festive, brightly colored indoor flower, the Gerbera or Transvaal daisy is a real favorite. Its blooms are long lasting and come in shades of creamy white, sunny yellow, orange, hot pink and red. Gerberas will be perfectly happy for about six weeks indoors before you plant them in early spring. The mature height of the Gerbera daisy is about eighteen inches, so plant them toward the front of the flowerbed, in full sun. Some varieties grow as an annual here, and some will be perennial, depending on the temperature in winter.

For many of us, nurturing the annual Christmas amaryllis bulb is a tradition. And many of us discard the bulb when the strap like leaves die down after the bloom is finished. We are gifted with a moderate climate here in West Georgia, and amaryllis will be perfectly happy to grow in your garden, blooming again by the next spring. Find a partly shady spot for amaryllis; it needs about 4 to 6 hours of sun, but doesn't want the hot afternoon sun baking it.

Did you know that miniature roses are even hardier outdoors than some of their larger sisters? Though the blooms look like a delicate flower, the miniature rose is just a very small variety - with tiny, beautiful flowers available in a rainbow of hues. This little beauty will be happy at the front of the garden, as an edging or as a specimen in a small bed, in full sun.

All of these "gift plants" will give you years of blooms once you plant them outdoors. Be sure to get them into the ground in early spring, so they have a bit of time to settle in before the heat of the summer. No need to fertilize when you plant, just give regular water and a little grooming now and then.

For more information or answers to any of your gardening questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.