

Indoor Blossom Power

BY TOVAH MARTIN

As winter descends,
flowering houseplants can
keep your gardening spirit
flourishing.



Hoya compacta

Success with any houseplant gives you that warm tingle of triumph. When something botanical performs its feats on your windowsill, it's impossible not to feel parental pride. But you reach another strata of achievement entirely when a green roommate goes one step further and bursts into blossom. You feel affirmed. You wallow in the glow of success.

Of course, flowers are not in the cards for all houseplants. When you purchase a foliage plant (think philodendrons, pothos, Chinese evergreens, etc.), hope for flowers is going to lead only to heartache. You might stumble into a dinky blossom or two, but nothing worth a second glance. However, the chance of floral fulfillment is far greater if you target members of families with that potential.

Needless to say, there are many flowering candidates that are windowsill-worthy. The suggestions below focus on plants that won't challenge your green thumb or cause you to search far afield for contenders. These are readily available plants that are easily hosted in the average home. Some houseplants are toxic, as I note in a couple of specific instances, so as a general rule it's best to keep all plants out of reach of children and pets.

FOR INDIRECT LIGHT

African violets (*Streptocarpus ionanthus*, formerly *Saintpaulia ionantha*) are definitely your grandmother's houseplants. But don't discount these windowsill warriors just because they've been doing the job for a long time. African violets are the standard bearers for the family, and their colorful clusters of flowers surrounded by a ring of plush leaves are fully capable of turning a dismal winter day around. There's no need to treat them like divas. Worrying about keeping the foliage dry and only quenching the plant's thirst via a saucer below is frankly a waste of time. Try to aim the watering spout at the soil rather than leaves and you'll be fine. And if you can't rise above the doily association with these plants, move on to other family members that also spend winter pumping out colorful flowers.

My personal penchant is for primulinas (*Primulina* spp.). These easily pleased housemates produce clusters of



Begonia 'Bunchii'



Streptocarpus ionanthus



Streptocarpus sp.

tubular flowers in a range of colors that includes yellow, pink, red, and blue with velveteen leaves that are often splattered with variegation.

Prefer something that dangles? Drape a lipstick plant (*Aeschynanthus* spp.) over your windowsill and enjoy long, tubular red or maroon dragonlike flowers that begin the performance with colorful bracts and hold the pose for weeks.

Not surprisingly, given their point of origin, members of the African violet clan prefer warm temperatures. Keep their pots away from chilly windowpanes. If you can't provide temperatures reliably above 65° Fahrenheit, skip Cape primroses (*Streptocarpus* spp.), which are particularly sensitive to cold.

Hoyas are experiencing a renaissance, although some of us have long been devotees. It's not surprising given that hoya foliage is handsome in a succulent sort of way, and the flowers are strictly galactic with umbels of stars-within-stars. They're in the same family (Apocynaceae) as milkweeds (*Asclepias* spp.), and you can clearly see the family resemblance. Plus, fragrance is often a factor—especially with heirloom favorite *Hoya carnosa* and its ever-popular cultivar 'Compacta'. We're talking a deep, rich chocolatey scent that will drive chocoholics crazy—but keep in mind that this plant is not edible.

Benign neglect is the secret to success with hoyas. When you lavish love on a hoyo, it responds by making more growth perhaps, but not blooming. Instead, hoyas prefer to be housed in a seemingly too tight container with good soil but no extra fertilizer. Deliver drinks when the soil is dry but not parched. Indirect sun is key. I've experienced the heartache that happens after moving a hoyo into bright light only to have it burn in a snap. Don't try that in your home. Place the plant away from the window.

I began my houseplant career in a nursery that specialized in begonias, and the infatuation never cooled. Fortunately, this large and diverse family provides plenty of fuel for my collecting penchant, but not all begonias readily blossom. The easiest bloomers to host in the average window fall within the rhizomatous group (with various shaped leaves popping from creeping



rhizomes), canelike begonias (sometimes called angelwings), and Hiemalis group begonias.

Although the foliage and growth habits are vastly different, depending upon which group you're entertaining, the flowers are similar in structure. The Hiemalis hybrids (including the Rieger types) feature colorful, showy clusters of flowers. Canelike begonias are a close second for the flowering wow-factor with dangling sprays of blossoms. Rhizomatous types are usually more subtle with a series of small blossoms held on wands in late winter. Most begonias prefer indirect light, warm temperatures, and detest overwatering. A shallow container works best for their root system that spreads horizontally.

Spurflowers (*Plectranthus* spp.) have the major perk of beginning their long bloom cycle in autumn when few other bloomers perform. Although showy flowers are not in the cards for all spurflowers, 'Mona Lavender' (a cross between *P. saccatus* and *P. hilliardiae*), 'Velvet Elvis', and hybrids of *P. oertendahlii* send up candelabralike plumes of little guppy-shaped flowers right when we're turning our attention from the outdoors to windowsill gardens in fall. The petal hues are primarily in the lavender and white range, but the patterned and colorful felted leaves are also intriguing. Plus, it's a long, delightful performance, especially if you deadhead spent wands. Best of all, these are about the easiest plants to entertain indoors.

They tolerate low light (however, don't push it if your goal is flowers) and low humidity. They are thirsty plants, so water regularly and check the root system for repotting needs.

FOR BRIGHT, DIRECT LIGHT

You may know pelargoniums, also known as zonal geraniums, from their windowbox associations. The good news is their cheerful, wanna-please personality comes to play indoors as well. You would have to work hard to kill a pelargonium, plus they perform. In the dead of winter, in nothing more than a well-lit east or west window (although south would be optimal), these primarily South African natives burst into clusters of many blossoms. The colors include reds, oranges, pinks, and white with all sorts of shades in between and double versions to boot. The contrast to the drab winter scene outside is dramatic. And they require so little effort on your part. All pelargoniums ask is regular watering. If you let the soil dry out to the point of being parched, your pelargonium will immediately respond with yellow leaves. Good drainage—both in your soil and container selection—will keep the plant perky. For best blooming, contain the root system in a modest-sized container—if the plant is swimming in an oversized pot, it will produce impressive foliage but not flowers.

If ever there was a plant group that aims to please, it's kalanchoes. My home hosts many family members, but you can't beat the flaming Katy (*Kalanchoe blossfeldiana*) for blossom power. Although the green succulent foliage is not particularly impressive, from earliest winter onward to spring those leaves are going to be hidden behind plump clusters of star-shaped flowers. The color range is incredible—including bright orange, yellow, cream, red, and magenta. In addition to the single forms, double-flowering types feature quantities of rosebudlike flowers in that same broad color range. Easily accommodated flaming Katy is copacetic with less-than-bright light, but the tight double forms can become a nasty bed of rotten flowers without sufficient light to support their performance.

Flaming Katy gets the most publicity, but other kalanchoes also turn on

TIPS FOR COAXING BLOOMS

Choosing an appropriate houseplant is not the only critical step toward your goal of indoor flowering. Light levels are also key. Some bloomers demand a sunny south-facing window to prompt buds. But don't assume that all flowering houseplants need very bright light to perform. A north-facing window is just not going to work the magic, however. In my Connecticut home, I have primarily bright east and west-facing windows, which reward me with blossoms galore. In a few cases, brighter south-facing locations are needed and generous lighting also sets up blossoms to achieve their true colors as opposed to washed-out versions. Similarly, consider rotating the plant, turning it every week or so, to gain equal light exposure from all angles.



Given bright light, many pelargoniums make excellent houseplants.

Beyond good light, not many variables stand between you and blossoms. In general, temperatures are not a factor, assuming that your home sits somewhere in the 55–70° Fahrenheit range that most of us find comfortable. Many bloomers tolerate low humidity, but if your HVAC keeps the house Sahara dry (we're talking chapped lips and staticky cats) it might be an issue. Many plants are hardwired to perform at a specific time of year, however, so be patient.

Grooming can also play a role. Needless to say, you don't want to prune a plant back immediately before it swings into its bud-forming business. But on the flip side, it's hard to furnish light to all angles of a shaggy or overgrown plant. As is the case with garden plants, deadheading will coax more flowers. Whisking away spent flowers promptly also diminishes the danger of disease.

the magic in winter. Copper spoons (*K. orgyalis*) holds wands of chartreuse blossoms above its bronzy felted leaves. And several other species send scandent stems draping over a container's sides, such as *K. uniflora*, which has colorful guppy-shaped flowers. Like all succulents, they prefer not to be overwatered.

If you hanker for something that's completely off the beaten track, kangaroo paws (*Anigozanthos* spp.) are a strong candidate. As you might surmise, this genus is native to Australia, and hardwired to perform during summer Down Under, a blooming cycle that translates to



Kalanchoe blossfeldiana
Calandiva series

late winter in North America. The fanlike grassy foliage is handsome, but when the flower spikes shoot up, that's the clincher. They're topped by Leprechaun green and red, pink or coral flowers shaped like, you guessed it—kangaroo paws. Originally, the full-sized version was a little too large for the average window. Now dwarf versions such as 'Kanga Pink' and 'Kanga Red' are readily available, and this wonder of nature is fully within our realm.

These plants tolerate low humidity, but a bright window will spark the best performance. And be prepared for the plant to sulk and go into a semi-dormant state in summer. Don't give up on it, because it will bounce back.

A fragrant hard hitter fully capable of sending your nose into orbit,



Anigozanthos sp.

Madagascar jasmine (*Stephanotis floribunda*) belongs to that same family as hoyas and milkweeds. In this instance, you've got an easily trained tidy vine clad in leathery thick, deep green leaves. Although stephanotis has traditionally been harnessed as a spring-blooming wedding bouquet standby, it begins performing in winter. In fact, it's often sold as a holiday plant. The eye candy (but note that all parts are poisonous) is fat clusters of glistening white, waxy, trumpet-shaped flowers. Beyond beauty, those thick leaves have another advantage of dissuading pests

from pestering the plant. But to keep this athlete happy, you'll need good light and you should keep the fertilizer coming even during the dark days of winter. Similarly, don't scrimp on the pot promotions.

If you inherited a long-lived Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*), join the crowd. Although the lines have been blurred between all the holiday seasonal blooming cacti due to some creative breeding, the good news is that you can invest in a *Schlumbergera* hybrid and wallow in a pretty wow performance sometime in the late autumn



Stephanotis floribunda



Schlumbergera 'Orange Flame'

Sources

Logee's Plants for Home & Garden, *logees.com*.

Steve's Leaves, *stevesleaves.com*.

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Resources

Bloom: The Secrets of Growing Flowering Houseplants Year-Round by Lisa Eldred Steinkopf. Cool Springs Press, 2022.

The Complete Houseplant Survival Manual by Barbara Pleasant. Storey Publishing, 2022.

Houseplants for Beginners: A Practical Guide to Choosing, Growing, and Helping Your Plants Thrive by Rebecca De La Paz. Callisto, 2021.

to winter months. The flowers are big, colorful, and impressively dragonlike. Kids love this sort of thing. The color range is also impressive, going from white through pale pink to fuchsia and coral. Plus, they hang on in prime condition for a protracted period of time.

Holiday cacti might be the most frequently misunderstood houseplants on the market. Most critically, although they're cacti, these succulents can't tolerate pounding sun outdoors in summer. Find them a spot with early morning sun or all day dappled shade. However, you're safe to house them on a sunny windowsill in winter. Absolutely follow your instincts to water lightly, but don't let them get dry to the point of drooping. And don't be in a hurry to repot them, even if they seem to need it. In this case, the result of benign neglect is a blossom display that will make you proud.

Rewards for your hospitality: That's what houseplants are all about. ■

Gardening author, photographer, and lecturer Tovah Martin is caretaker to 200+ green housemates, which share her often drafty historic Connecticut home with her cat, Einstein, who has been taught not to nibble.