



In July, we overlook them in all their abundance.

But in January, highlighted by the glisten of ice just beyond the windows, a colorful blossom on a plant offers cheery promise of far-away springtime. Prized far more because of their scarcity, each bloom poking jauntily above green foliage is welcomed like a special friend.

Reigning above the other plants scattered about the windowsills is a stately amaryllis, its lily-white blooms, five-plus-inches across, poking out the top of a bare, green stalk. The amaryllis' bare bulb

was a holiday gift from our daughter, arriving all packaged in its own pre-planted pot. Just add water and stir ... as the instant-food-mix instructions would say.

While watering on one of the coldest (hopefully THE coldest) morning of the winter, I discovered slivers of ice in the drip-saucer under the amaryllis' plastic pot. Just the thing that a semi-tropical bulb needs on a sub-zero-degree morning. Luckily, I had just minutes before brought from the barn office several sheets of styrofoam wrapping. Moving plants to tuck the styrofoam insu-

lation beneath, I admired one that is the very essence of early spring. A clump of clear pink and white blooms rises up from the primrose's neat rosette of foliage, each with a starlike center of yellow.

Some years, primroses of assorted colors have brightened the kitchen windowsills, each brought up from the greenhouse in turn as they began blooming. But the only primroses on the place this winter were the ones hunkered down under the ice layer at the corner of the house. When the neighborhood supermarket ran a sale on them recently, I added one to my cart. My mistake. I should have gotten a couple.

On the sill behind the kitchen sink blooms an assortment of African violets, some raised from other years, a few purchased at another bargain sale. African violets are persnickety plants and my luck with them over the years were poor. Then, I read a few years ago never to summer them at an open window. It works for me. A pink blossomed-one with purple polka dots remains my favorite, but a blue-violet and white picoteed one is running a close

second.

Wintering on a west window blessed with afternoon sunshine is a collection of juvenile impatiens plants, some of them sporting blooms of red, pink or fuschia. They were fall cuttings, rooted during September's warmth, and sheltered in the greenhouse until recent weeks.

The move to the house was designed to hasten their growth, developing larger plants from which more cuttings can be started by early spring. It may prove to be the only impatiens left of a couple dozen originally moved in for the winter. With only minimal heat in the greenhouse, the bitter cold snap took its toll on the warmth-loving impatiens.

Faring better are several hale and hearty geraniums, durable survivors in the under-glass environment which may swing from

near-freezing on zero mornings to 70 degrees a few hours later on a sunny day. Also oblivious to the temperature changes are the pots of paperwhite narcissus bulbs, which open the most wonderfully-fragrant blooms at the top of the tall, thin stalks.

Heartiest of anything in the greenhouse is — unfortunately — a rat, or family of them, that has claimed winter housing rights, excavating homes under the stone wall. Mounds of dirt and gravel testify to some intense burrow building and have made a real mess of the graveled floor.

Through this cold, dark, mid-winter weather, the foliage and blooms of the windowsills and the greenhouse offer a sure boost for the spirit and morale. And I have no intention of sharing that with a rat.

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