

Wallflower or Belle of the Ball?

IT'S NOT THE MOST POPULAR HOUSEPLANT AROUND, AND THAT'S A SHAME. HOYA IS PRETTY, FRAGRANT, DROUGHT-TOLERANT AND EASY TO PROPAGATE. WHAT MORE COULD YOU WANT?

BY LINDA GARTZ

Is there a perfect houseplant? Ellen Zachos thinks it's the hoyo, sometimes called the wax plant. "I love the variety and succulence of the foliage that makes them drought tolerant and low maintenance. They have beautiful flowers, many are extremely fragrant, and I'm fond of vines—so I can hang them in my windows. It all adds up to the perfect plant."

Ellen is coordinator of the gardening program in continuing education at the New York Botanical Garden. She likes hoyas so much, she wanted to share—so a few years ago, she gave Chicago's Lincoln Park Conservatory its first hoyas. But she's kept plenty for herself. Ellen grows more than 100 of hoyo's 200 or so species in her home.

This kind of dedication to the hoyo is unusual, at least in the Chicagoland area. Michelle Wheeler, horticulturist for Good Earth Greenhouse in River Forest says, "They're not trendy. We don't get much of a call for them." That sentiment was echoed repeatedly in my informal poll of several widely disbursed local garden centers—though most carry at least a few species off and on during the year.

So what will it take to transform this wallflower into the belle of the houseplant ball? We just have to get to know her a little better—to let her irresistible features speak for themselves.

Culture

Hoyas share an exotic pedigree. Tropical epiphytes in nature (meaning they grow on or attached to another living plant), they originate primarily in the understory of rainforests in such far-flung locales as India, China, Malaysia, and the Philippines, but



Flowers of *Hoya multiflora* resemble tiny shooting stars (above). Other hoyas have flattened, star-like blooms in clusters, such as *H. 'Silver Pink'* (right).

some also come from Australia and the Himalayas. Growing in dappled sunlight means hoyas can find happiness as houseplants, but they do require some sun to thrive and blossom.

"The biggest mistake people make with hoyas is over-watering and putting them in a dark room," says Regina Gardino of Gardino Nursery Corp. in Delray Beach, Florida, whose website features twelve varieties of hoyo. "The more light you give hoyas, the more they will bloom for you."

And you do want to encourage blooming since the flowers are just one more fabulous feature of this underappreciated plant. Hoyas bear from twelve to several dozen star-shaped, waxy flowers hanging in umbels (like small umbrellas), in a



wide-range of colors and sizes. They often bloom from spring to fall, but species like *Hoya carnososa* or *Hoya lobbii*, with its two-tone pink flower, can bloom year-round. "Hoyas have to be a certain age and pot-bound to bloom," says Zachos, "but there's no hard and fast rule as to when."

"It really depends on the species," says Regina Gardino. "For example *Hoya multiflora* [with flowers that look like tiny shooting stars] will bloom

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in 4-inch pots but the *Hoya imperialis* [with wide, open, star-like flowers] will take two or three years to bloom. Most of the hoyas we sell will bloom in one or two years.”

An unobstructed eastern exposure (no trees, awnings, blinds, etc.) is usually ideal, but a southern exposure can work too. “I have lots of my hoyas in southern exposure, but they’re usually the variegated type. Some leaves may fade somewhat in full sun, but if that’s all you’ve got, just put up a sheer curtain or move them a little away from the window,” suggests Zachos. Adding artificial light (fluorescent shop fixtures aren’t good enough) is another possibility if your indoor space is really light deprived.

Most advice cautions against removing the little nub (the peduncle) that’s left over after the flowers fall off since many hoyas will reset their blooms from this nub. To be safe, leave the peduncle in place, although some species are said to create new ones for each new blooming cycle.

Picks for Beginners

So which species makes the most sense for beginners? Zachos recommends any *Hoya carmosa*. “It’s ideal for a beginner, both because it’s easy to grow and easy to find. *Hoya bella* is petite and pretty. In a 4-inch pot, it’s good for a small amount of space. Also good for limited space is *Hoya curtisii*. It’s got leaves a little smaller than a dime and gets a red tint in the sun. *Hoya lacunosa*’s flowers are small and not showy, but it has a great fragrance.”

Regina Gardino would add *Hoya multiflora*, *H. pachyclada*, *H. australis*, *H. ‘Silver Pink’*, *H. diptera*, and *H. kerii* to the list for starting out.

Pests

As far as pests are concerned, Jan Kehe, indoor plant buyer for Geimer Greenhouse in Long Grove, says, “Mealybugs seem to be the most common problem. If you catch them early, they’re easy to get rid of. You can use a soap solution on a cotton swab and dab at the cotton candy-like growths. Or you can use a systemic in the soil as a preventive measure every six weeks.”

Ellen Zachos suggests adding a little

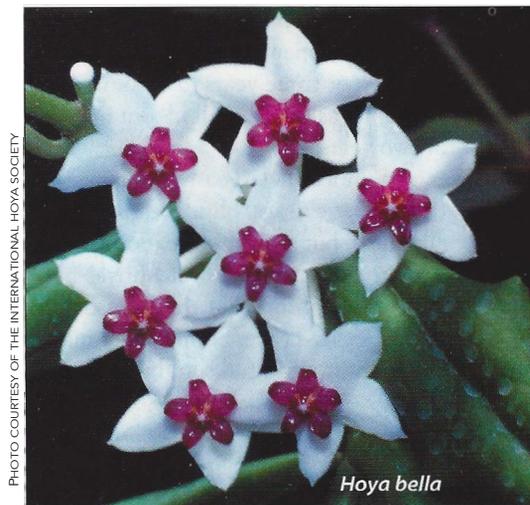


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mineral oil to a soap solution in a 6-inch dish pan and covering both sides of the leaves for 15 minutes. “The oil is needed to penetrate the bugs’ mealy covering,” she says.

Propagation

Cuttings are the ideal way to propagate these plants, and Zachos has developed her own special method. “They readily produce roots and long vining stems. Take a cutting 4 to 6 inches long and break off the bottom two leaves. Then let it sit on a shelf for six to eight hours to form a callous. After it hardens off, wrap the cut end in a moist paper towel and put it in a zippered plastic bag. Blow it up to seal in the moist, poofy air. Check it regularly to be sure the towel is staying moist (spray with water if not). When you see roots beginning to form, remove the paper towel (don’t damage the roots—it’s ok to include a bit of the towel) and plant it in a soilless potting mix.”

Add “easy to propagate” to all of hoyas’ other alluring traits, yet it remains relatively unknown. Lois McDermott, buyer for the indoor plants at Pasquesi Home and Gardens, Barrington and Lake Forest, says, “It’s not a very popular plant, but people love them when I explain how hardy they are and how little care they actually need. You can either hang them or let them grow up a small trellis. You don’t have to worry about transplanting them because they like to be pot-bound. They can make people without much of a green thumb feel successful.”

Well, what are you waiting for? It’s time to ask the hoyas to dance! ❀