

## **From Grocery Store to Garden, Foothill-Style**

**By Celia Kea**

Do you ever walk by the display of living, blooming plants in the grocery store and wonder, “Am I buying a live bouquet just to watch it die or can it survive?” I wondered and I experimented. So I’m about to spill a secret.

Since my yard is reaching capacity, I will divulge my secret source of cheap perennials that do well year after year—the grocery store (a local chain is my favorite). They have many good garden plants. If you are willing to buy them after blooming, they are quite reasonable. Of course, you have to know what you’re doing. Some plants are completely unsuited to our temperature extremes.

Here are four that have done well over the years at my 3000’ elevation:

**Miniature roses** are the absolute stars. Colors of red, yellow and white are easy to find. An occasional gem of a unique hue can sometimes be found. They survive winter snows, although mine have never been completely buried for more than a few days. Gophers may nibble the roots and clean the stems of leaves as high as they can reach, but the roses continue to bloom and grow. The blossoms may be small, about the size of a ping-pong ball, but the plants can grow to more than three feet tall.

You can plant a row of them for a living fence. If you bury long stems, they will often root to multiply your crop of flowers. The survival rate is virtually 100% since you can take cuttings, even from a dying plant. They will tolerate soggy periods and dusty, dry periods. They bloom several times a year—different colors at different times. Hummingbirds and butterflies will come to visit them.

**Lilies** are elegant and beautiful. After displaying them in your house, you can plant them in the garden. White Easter lilies and the exquisite stargazer lilies both come back year after year.

Easter lilies grow to about 18”, the branches, fairly uniform in size and shape, coming from the base. Of course, the bloom time may not coincide with Easter, since they are manipulated in greenhouses the first year. Bloom time will also depend on the exposure where you plant them. Generally, the sunnier their location, the earlier they bloom. They like mostly sun on top and shady, moist conditions near the roots.

If you are undecided about placement, you can leave them in the pot and dig a hole to set the pot into the ground. They don’t seem bothered by crowding, which helps temper the microclimate.

The stargazer will produce a stalk as thick as your thumb and about four feet tall, topped by as many as eight blossoms as big as your hand. The flowers have white petals with deep pink stripes and spots. Absolutely stunning...a florist’s favorite!

Gophers don’t seem interested in lilies. Though I’ve never risked planting the stargazer in the ground, gophers burrow right around my Easter lilies. These have survived and multiplied for some five years now. My first stargazer is growing strong in its original wooden planter some nine years later. The survival rate is about 80-90%.

**Chrysanthemums** are easy to keep alive. Summer shade and winter sun are their favorites. This is easier in pots. Since gophers LOVE them (as they do most other

members of the composite family) chrysanthemums are best in planters than can't be reached (12" tall and up). Legginess can be a problem, so don't hesitate to prune after blooming. A little rooting hormone powder and cuttings become new plants. These are highly successful.

**Gerbera Daisies** are absolute gems. These are the daisy-like flowers used most on TV. The trick to them is that they hate to have wet feet. The gift they give is that they thrive in the blazing midsummer sun. My best advice is to put them in clay pots. If they droop from dryness, a little water will bring them right back. If they get soggy and droopy, your only hope is to let them dry until you think they're dead, then resume sparse watering. Their flowers are directional, so having them in pots will allow you to rotate the plant for the best view of each blossom.

*Celia Kea is a Master Gardener who believes what she's taught, but can't help testing it anyway.*