

Poinsettia, Cyclamen, and other Holiday Plants.

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The poinsettia you received as a gift or purchased as a decoration can remain decorative for at least 4 months if you follow some easy-care practices. The first practice is to keep it well-watered. The soil should be kept moist. Plan on soaking it in the sink every weekend and use 7 or 8 ice cubes every day during the week to meet the plants need for water. In years past if the poinsettia was allowed to dry out, even once, you could expect the green leaves to drop first and then the red leaves would drop. The modern poinsettias are more tolerant of dryness than in the past but will decline if they are allowed to dry out several times.

Another key to poinsettia longevity is to keep the plant out of warm or cold drafts. They should not be placed in front of heat registers or doors to the outside during cold weather. Just a few minutes outside in freezing weather will result in defoliation. Sitting in a car during cold or hot weather will also result in damage.

Poinsettias do not require access to full sun but if you can place them in front of a window where there is morning sun or bright light contributes to a long life.

Many gardeners think of cyclamen as outdoor winter plants for full shade, but they were originally used as indoor plants. If you received one as a Holiday gift, and it is planted in an 8 to 12-inch container, place it in front of a window that receives morning sun, and it will bloom all year long. Another option is to purchase a 4-inch plant from the nursery and pot it up to a decorative container. It is hard to imagine a more attractive indoor blooming plant than a red, white, pink, or purple flowered cyclamen.

Some gardeners swear that cyclamen has a pleasant fragrance in addition to spectacular blooms, but I can't detect any! One Holiday plant that definitely has a "fragrance" is paperwhite. Most of us believe it is more accurate to describe the "fragrance" as a "smell," that borders on being unpleasant. Plant the forced paperwhite that you received as a Holiday gift out in the landscape. It will grow in sun or partial shade to produce deer-proof blooms and lush foliage every January with minimal care. Just let the foliage decline naturally to replenish the bulb and it will be the first plant that blooms in your yard every year.

Amaryllis are also forced to bloom for holiday decorations. Some varieties naturalize in the landscape, but it is more reliable to use them as container plants. After the bloom declines (or even before) plant the bulb in a 10 to 12-inch pot filled with good potting mix. Keep it watered but not soggy until the foliage declines sometime in early summer. Quit watering until about October 1st when irrigation is resumed. The bulb will send out a new flower and foliage. Sit the container in morning sun. Fertilize with soluble fertilizer labeled for containers every month when it is growing.

Phalaenopsis orchids will retain their bloom and re-bloom every year if you give them reasonable care. The right amount of light is important. We put ours on the kitchen counter below a southern exposed window. They will also prosper at an eastern facing window. Recognize that there is too much sun if the leaves show beige colored burns. Water every week

and fertilize at the same time with a dilute-soluble fertilizer in the water. Phalaenopsis orchids require well drained soil and often are grown in bark chunks. They will rebloom every year for 4 months.

Christmas cactus is not the kind of cactus with which we are familiar in San Antonio. They are cactus that grow in tropical rain forests and require high levels of moisture. They are many selections of Christmas cactus with blooms in variations of magenta, red, pink, and white. Christmas cactus will bloom every year. In late spring put them in morning sun on the patio until temperatures start dropping below 40 degrees in the fall.. If your blooms drop, suspect too much sun, too much cold, or too little water.

Kalanchoe bloom nearly as long as poinsettias. They have fleshy round leaves with large clusters of red, yellow, or orange blooms. Kalanchoe are much more drought-tolerant than poinsettias. It is not necessary to keep their soil moist. Water when the soil has dried to an inch or more.

Place your kalanchoe in a sunny window for best performance. When the bloom is complete, the compost pile is probably the best destination for the plant. It is difficult to get them to bloom again.