

Caring for Holiday Plants

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Did you receive a plant as a gift this Christmas or are you thinking of taking advantage of the post-Christmas bargains on holiday plants at your favorite nursery? With appropriate care many of the plants will provide a long season of blooms this year and for years to come.

Poinsettia is available in shades of red, pink, crème, salmon and even bicolor. The showy holiday tradition will often provide 4-5 months of attractive color. The key to long life of poinsettia is keeping them moist. Poinsettia is not a xeriscape plant.

Deal with the inconvenience of removing them from your display to water them every other day by using ice cubes as the in-week watering mechanism. Every day put 7 or 8 ice cubes in the container. They melt slowly and usually do not leak out the drain hole on to the floor or furniture. On Saturday or Sunday give the plant a thorough soaking in the sink.

In addition to frequent watering, a long lived poinsettia is one that is not subjected to cold or hot drafts. Such drafts can come from heat registers or doors to the outside. Even exposure to a Western or Southern window that allows a blast of sunlight to overheat the plant could reduce its life.

Christmas cactus is another great holiday plant. There are several colors to select from including white, pink and red. It is a cactus that evolved on the trees in tropical jungles, so water is very important to a showy performance and life after the holidays. If you decide to increase the pot size, use well-drained soil. For best display, place Christmas cactus in a bright room. Like poinsettia avoid windows where it will be subject to a blast of afternoon sun.

After the bloom period keep Christmas cactus in the house until next summer when it can go outside to a spot where it receives morning or dappled sun. It may bloom again next year, usually at Thanksgiving.

Cyclamen is a spectacular blooming plant for containers or beds outside in deep shade through the winter. It is equally spectacular as a houseplant. Select from red, white, purple, lilac, or lavender in the large flowered or small flowered versions.

Outside the cyclamen quits blooming in April or May when the days warm up. In an air conditioned house it will bloom for years if you find a good spot by an East facing window.

Like Christmas cactus grow cyclamen in a well-drained soil that is kept moist.

Phalaenopsis orchid (also called moth orchid) won't bloom an entire year in the house like cyclamen, but the blooms will last for 4 to 5 months if the holiday plants are placed at an east facing window and receive plenty of water and soluble fertilizer. Phalaenopsis orchids are

usually planted in bark instead of soil. They can tolerate soil if it is very well drained. Find the right spot in terms of sunlight and your Phalaenopsis will bloom every year.

There are two bulb plants that are common Christmas holiday gifts, paperwhite and amaryllis. Both will use the stored starches in their bulb to produce a bloom or blooms over the holidays.

For paperwhites, keep the bulbs in water while they are blooming and decorating the house. After the blooms fade, plant them out in the yard in full sun or partial shade. They will naturalize and bloom every year in January. The lush green foliage and blooms are a welcome addition to the often dreary January landscape. Paper whites are especially good for San Antonio landscapes because they are deer proof.

Amaryllis bulbs produce a large flower or stalk of flowers from their substantial bulb. Some of the old-fashioned selections naturalized but the huge current selections produce an impressive bloom for the holidays but will probably not bloom more than one or two years if planted in our soil and heat. Happy Holidays!