

Holiday Houseplants



Giving and receiving plants during the holidays, especially Thanksgiving and Christmas, is a common practice. To keep the beauty of these plants through the holidays and beyond, you must understand their needs.

Here are some plants typically available during the holidays to brighten up your home.

Poinsettia

Euphorbia pulcherrima

The poinsettia is the classic Christmas plant. It is possible to enjoy your poinsettia many weeks into the New Year. To prolong the bracts' color, keep daytime temperatures between 68 and 72 °F and nighttime temperatures about 60 °F. Place the plant in a bright location. To increase the humidity around the plant, place the poinsettia on a saucer filled with gravel and water. Poinsettias do not like drastic temperature changes, so keep them away from vents, radiators, and space heaters. For information on continued growth after Christmas and reflowering, see **Extension Publication 2573 Home Horticulture: Selecting and Maintaining Poinsettias**.

Note: Although research has shown the poinsettia to be nontoxic, it is not recommended for consumption by humans or animals. Some individuals may develop skin irritation when exposed to the milky sap.

Holiday Cacti

The main types of holiday cacti are Thanksgiving cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*),



Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera x buckleyi*), and Easter cactus (*Hatiora gaertneri*).

The Thanksgiving cactus typically blooms early in the holiday season, from Thanksgiving through Christmas. The leaf margins on this cactus have two to four saw-toothed projections pointing upward on the sides of the stem. This cactus comes in several flower colors, ranging from red and lavender to salmon-orange and white.

The Christmas cactus blooms later in the season, from Christmas through March. The leaf margins usually have four rounded scallops along the edges of the stem. The flower colors are usually red and white.

Although not a winter holiday plant, the Easter cactus is a great plant to give in the spring. The Easter cactus generally blooms from March to May. It may bloom again in the fall. Flowers are usually pink or red. Leaf margins are smoother than the other seasonal cacti and have brownish, hair-like bristles at their tips.

Caring for holiday cacti is not difficult. They prefer high humidity. They will not bloom if kept too warm, so keep them in cooler parts of the house, away from heat sources such as vents, televisions, and refrigerators. A coarse soil mix (high humus, sharp sand) that provides drainage is important. Keep the soil medium moist, not wet. Holiday cacti can easily be overwatered and are susceptible to root rot.

For repeat flowering, place cacti in a room with cool temperatures (60 to 65 °F), stop fertilizing, allow the soil to become dry



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between waterings, and provide 12 hours of uninterrupted darkness every night for 5 to 6 weeks. Once flower buds appear, move the plants to a bright-light location and resume normal watering and fertilizing. Maintain cool temperatures (60 to 70 °F) to avoid bud drop. Cacti are easy to propagate by making cuttings of stem sections. Propagation works best when done in early spring or summer.

Norfolk Island Pine

Araucaria heterophylla



Norfolk Island pines are very common during the holiday season. They are typically sold as living Christmas trees. Three to four small trees may be in one container. Although many people think the Norfolk Island pine is a cold-weather plant, it is actually a tropical plant native to the southern hemisphere in Australia

and the Norfolk Islands. This plant, though often used as a compact houseplant, can grow up to 200 feet in its native habitat.

Norfolk Island pines prefer high to medium light (an east- or west-facing window) and cool day temperatures (50 to 70 °F) and night temperatures (45 and 65 °F). Temperatures below 45 °F can damage the growing tips of the branches.

Provide high humidity and good ventilation for the plant. Age and lack of humidity cause needles on the trunk to fall off. Additionally, water the plant on a regular basis. Dry and brown lower branches indicate the plant is dehydrated. Norfolk Island pines do not tolerate wet soil, however. Sporadic yellow needle clusters indicate the plant has been overwatered.

Fertilize every 2 to 3 weeks during its active growing season (March through September).

Jerusalem Cherry

Solanum pseudocapsicum

Another common holiday plant is the Jerusalem cherry, also known as the Christmas cherry or winter cherry. This bushy evergreen shrub produces white flowers in the summer that give rise to small, round, reddish-orange fruit in the winter, usually around Christmas.



As a houseplant, Jerusalem cherry requires bright light or full sun to thrive. Mist the plant often. Lack of

humidity causes the plant to lose its leaves, blooms, or fruit. Keep the plant in a room with temperatures below 70 °F. Higher temperatures may cause leaf, flower, or fruit drop. Fertilize the plant with a basic houseplant fertilizer while it is actively growing. Stop fertilizer treatment after the plant has finished blooming.

After the fruits have dropped, cut the plant back drastically and place it outside. Do not put the plant outside if temperatures are below 41 °F. You may plant the Jerusalem cherry outside in a part-sun location. If you wish to bring it back in for the holidays, do so before the first frost. If the plant is still in flower when you bring it inside, be sure to tap or shake the plant to ensure pollination and later fruit formation. Keep the soil moist while the plant is actively growing, but do not overwater it.

Note: All parts of the Jerusalem cherry, especially the fruit, are toxic and may be fatal if eaten. Keep out of reach of children.

Cyclamen

Cyclamen persicum

The cyclamen is another holiday favorite.

Cyclamen flowers come in white, pink, magenta, red, lavender, and deep purple. While cyclamen flowers bloom, keep the plant cool (55 to 60 °F) and in a room with



bright, indirect light. To provide needed humidity around a cyclamen, set the bare pot on a saucer filled with gravel and water (you don't need to do this if you keep it cool). Keep the soil moist while the plant is in bloom. Do not let it dry out. When watering a cyclamen, use lukewarm water and avoid dampening the crown. Water all around the inside of the pot instead of directly over it.

Remove faded blooms at their starting point. When the flowers have faded, pull them out of the corm and begin fertilizing with a diluted solution until new leaves appear. When leaves begin to fade, stop fertilizing, and gradually reduce the water, allowing the corm to go dormant. When the soil has become completely dry and all leaves have died down, allow the plant to rest for 6 to 12 weeks in a cool, dark place. Ideally, you should allow the plant to stay dormant during the warmest weather, then it will flower in winter and spring.

Remove the corm from the pot and replant in fresh potting soil, with one-third to one-half of the corm's top portion sticking out above the soil's surface. When a new leaf forms, begin watering again, and fertilize once a month until flower buds form.

Kalanchoe

Kalanchoe blossfeldiana

Kalanchoe plants are native to Africa and Madagascar. The many exciting colors include red, yellow, orange, and pink. Kalanchoe flowers have been bred to last a long time. While the kalanchoe is in flower, water it thoroughly, letting the soil dry between waterings. Do not keep the soil dry for too long, or the flowers will drop prematurely. Usually the soil takes 1 to 2 weeks to dry out, depending on the size of the pot and the temperature. Kalanchoes do not like wet feet, so do not over-water them. Give new plants enough fertilizer to keep them through their first flowering. If you have an older plant, fertilize it every 3 weeks while it is in flower. Kalanchoes tolerate most light levels, but they prefer medium light. The best room temperature is 50 to 70 °F during the day and 40 to 65 °F at night.

After the plant has flowered, cut the flower stems back to the second or third leaf below the old flowers. You may use a standard houseplant fertilizer every 2 to 4 weeks after new growth appears. For your kalanchoe to flower again, it needs short days (or days with fewer than 11 hours of sunlight). Getting a kalanchoe to reflower can be tricky. To flower, the plant needs 14 hours of uninterrupted darkness for 8 weeks. A small amount of light (room lights, street lamps) during this 14 hours can keep it from flowering. Do not place a kalanchoe in a dark room that does not receive any light. The more light the plant receives during the short day, the faster it will flower. An easy way to provide uninterrupted darkness is to cover your plant with a box lined with a black plastic bag every day at 5 p.m. and uncover it the next day at 8 a.m.



Ornamental Peppers

Capiscum spp.

Ornamental pepper plants are often found in stores around the holidays. These plants produce colorful fruit (peppers) that come in a wide range of shapes, sizes, and colors, including purple, white, red, yellow, orange, brown, and blue. A single plant can have three different colors of peppers on it. These plants make great houseplants as well as ornamental landscape plants.



Whether inside or outside, ornamental peppers need full sun or bright light. Water them regularly, letting the soil dry between waterings. Plants remain more compact if the soil is kept on the dry side. Ornamental peppers do not like wet soil. Actively growing plants need light fertilization. While peppers are inside your home, keep them in a room that stays between 50 and 70 °F. You can eat these peppers if they have not been treated with pesticides. They may be extremely hot and bitter.

Rosemary

Rosmarinus officinalis

Rosemary topiaries are popular during the holiday season because they are often shaped like Christmas trees and are very fragrant. With proper care, these topiaries can be kept alive long after the holiday season.

Rosemary prefers a sunny location in the home. Watering rosemary can be tricky. Rosemary does not like to have wet feet (roots), so make sure the plant is in well-drained soil. Water rosemary thoroughly but not often, based on the soil moisture level.

After the holiday season, you may move your rosemary plant outside and either keep it in the pot or plant it in your garden. Rosemary is a perennial in Mississippi and prefers full sun, but it will tolerate some shade. If you wish to keep the topiary's shape, you will need to prune it often. Don't discard the pruned pieces. Use them in the kitchen to liven up your cooking.



Amaryllis

Hippeastrum hybridii

Amaryllis is a popular indoor flowering plant in the winter and spring. It has large, showy blooms in colors ranging from white to shades of pink, salmon, red, and orange. It is the easiest bulb to bring into bloom, as it does not require pre-cooling to flower like daffodils and tulips. If you cannot pot your new bulb immediately, keep it in a cool, dry location with good air circulation. Do not expose it to freezing, damp conditions. When ready to pot, use a container no larger than 1½ times the diameter of the bulb as it



likes to be pot bound. Use a good potting mix and sink the bulb up to the neck. Place in a warm, bright light situation, and water sparingly until the stem appears. As the bud and leaves appear, gradually water more. Do not overwater because this will cause the bulb to rot. It is not necessary to fertilize during this flower development time.

Bulbs will flower 6 to 8 weeks after potting, depending on the growing conditions and variety. When in flower, move the plant where you will receive the most enjoyment, preferably in a cool, shaded area, which will prolong the floral display. After flowering, cut the old flowering stalk off 2 inches from the bulb. Put the plant back into a warm, bright-sunlight area of your home, water, and begin fertilizing with a complete houseplant fertilizer, following the directions on the label. This will ensure that the leaves continue to grow and produce the sugars that will eventually be stored in the bulb to produce next season's blooms.

After danger of frost has passed, move the plant outdoors to a full sun area and continue to water and fertilize as needed. In the fall, before frost, start cutting back on the watering, as this will signal the plant that it is time to go dormant. As the soil dries, the foliage will begin to yellow. Move the plant (pot and all) into a cellar or other dark, dry place. Amaryllis pots can be turned on their sides and stored in the garage or under a greenhouse bench during the dormant period as well. It is generally recommended that amaryllis bulbs remain in this dormant state for 8 weeks, after which time you can bring them out and start the whole process over again.

Azalea

Rhododendron spp. Various cultivars

Keep the plant in a well-lit location, but avoid direct sun while in flower. A night temperature between 55 °F and 60 °F will prolong flowering.

Keep the soil uniformly moist; never allow it to dry out completely.

During the bloom period, regularly remove any dead flowers.

When it's finished flowering, you can

replant your azalea in a larger container, if needed, and move it outdoors after danger of frost has passed. The azalea could be planted during the growing season into a landscape bed in a shady location. During the growing season use a fertilizer recommended for acid-loving plants, following the directions on the label.

Whether it survives the winter in your location depends on what type of florist azalea it is. Some cultivated varieties of azaleas are designed for inside use only. Others are "hardy" varieties that can be planted in the garden. Be sure to ask your florist what type of azaleas they carry. If they are unsure of the winter hardiness you may want to chance it and plant it in the garden to see if it will overwinter. If it doesn't make it, you can always buy another holiday azalea houseplant next winter.

Because florist-type azaleas need precise growing conditions in the greenhouse for blooming in the winter months, this plant is difficult for the homeowner to achieve a repeat bloom in the home environment. Therefore, it is not recommended for this purpose.



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