

How to Care for Your Holiday Plants

Poinsettia

With a little care, the new varieties of poinsettias on the market today will provide you with a colorful pot plant for several months.

After receiving your poinsettia, remove or punch holes in the bottom of the foil on the pot. Poinsettias will not tolerate wet feet! Place the pot in a plate or shallow saucer to catch the water. When you water, add enough to saturate the soil. If the saucer still contains water after 3 or 4 hours, remove the plant and dump the excess. Allow the soil to go dry between waterings. Watch the plant itself. When the leaves begin to droop a little, then water thoroughly.

Feed your poinsettia once a week with a liquid or dissolvable fertilizer. Follow the label directions for the amounts of fertilizer. Keep your poinsettia in a bright sunny window as much as possible. Poinsettias need as much light as you can give them. If you are having company and want to use the poinsettia somewhere else this is no problem; just return it to its window location within a couple of days.

Want to save your poinsettia for next Christmas? It can be done, it just requires some time and effort on your part.

1. Keep your poinsettia indoors until the first of May, until the danger of frost is over.
2. Cut your plant back before moving it outside. Cut the branches back to 4-6" long. Don't worry if no leaves are left, new ones will soon appear.
3. Plant the poinsettia, pot and all, outside in the yard. Choose a location, if possible, where the plant receives full sun all morning.
4. Don't forget to feed and water after planting out.
5. Around September 1, cut your poinsettia back again. Leave branches 4-6" long. Remove plant from ground and shift it to a slightly larger pot (i.e. shift a 6" pot up to a 7 or 7 1/2").
6. After repotting, the plant can still be left outdoors until about the first of October unless you expect frost.
7. Beginning the first week of October, it is necessary to start a period of 12-13 hours total darkness for the plant. This treatment must continue for the month of October. This dark period is critical, without it your plant will not bloom for Christmas.

The requirement is 12-13 hours of darkness at night and full sun if possible during the day. In our area we receive 12 hours of natural darkness during October. Put your poinsettia in the sunny window of a room that receives no artificial light at night; the plant will set flower buds naturally.

If you do not have this kind of room, then you must move your plant each day. Place the plant in a closet or unused room at 5 p.m. each day. Be sure not to turn the light on in that room at night, even for a short period of time. The other requirement is that the temperature in these rooms must be 60-65°F Each morning at 7 or 8 move your poinsettia back to a sunny window. Do this each and every day until the first of November; then you just leave the plant in its sunny location. Continue to feed and water the same way you did the previous winter.

If you follow this schedule faithfully, you will be rewarded with a beautiful Christmas poinsettia that **you** grew yourself!

There are many beautiful blooming plants available for the holidays. Poinsettias are of course the most popular, and nothing can take its place.

Azaleas

Azaleas are nice companion plants to poinsettias. Most of the azaleas seen at Christmas have been forced into bloom. Most are not hardy in our area. An azalea with the buds just showing color should give you 4 to 6 weeks of enjoyment. Keep the plant in the coolest part of a room and keep the soil constantly moist. When the blooms fade, keep the plant as a green plant through the winter. If you would like to save the plant, you can try the following steps:

1. After bloom remove dead flowers.
2. Place in sunny window.
3. Keep well fed and watered.
4. Move outside in May to a partly sunny location.
5. Plant pot and all in ground.
6. Feed and water.
7. In the fall, mulch around the base of plant and protect from the wind with burlap screen if necessary.
8. Leave azalea outside until November 1.
9. Bring inside to a cool room with a sunny window.
10. Feed and water.

With a little luck, you should have a beautiful azalea in full bloom by Christmas!

Kalanchoe

This is a colorful, long-lived plant which should be treated as a succulent. It has thick fleshy leaves and bright flowers. Kalanchoes normally bloom in January, but they can be forced into bloom at any time of the year by controlling their exposure to darkness. Kalanchoes are now available in many colors: red, pink, yellow, and orange.

Be careful not to overwater or overfeed your kalanchoe. Kalanchoes bloom for a long period, 10-12 weeks. As each flower cluster fades remove it and its stem. Once the plant is done blooming, you still have an attractive green foliage plant that will continue to grow. If the plant becomes too large, either repot or cut back the plant to its original size or smaller, and watch it grow again.

Christmas Cactus or Thanksgiving Cactus

These are actually two distinct species of *Zygocactus*. The old-fashioned Christmas cactus is more difficult to rebloom than the new hybrids. The new colorful hybrids actually bloom naturally around Thanksgiving. The old-fashioned form requires a period of 50 degree F nights in the fall, which causes the plants to bloom around Christmas.

Both species should be kept in a shady outdoor area or porch during the summer. In the fall, leave outside until freezing weather approaches. Keep the plant as dry as possible without having the plants wilt. Do not fertilize after the first of September.

The *zygocactus* enjoys being pot-bound so do not repot too often. These plants will live for many years and many have been passed on from one generation to another.

Cyclamen

This is a long-lasting blooming plant. It does, however, have very specific requirements for its care. Cyclamen will not tolerate temperatures above 65 degrees F and really prefers night temperatures of 45 to 50 degrees F. In the house, in the winter, keep your plant in the coolest spot you can, with as much sun as possible. Cyclamen do not need much fertilizer; once a month feedings with a liquid fertilizer is sufficient.

Try to keep the soil moist without overwatering. Do not allow your plant to sit in water trapped in a saucer or a decorative foil cover.

As each bloom fades remove it and as much of the flower stem as you can. Cyclamen have very few insect problems other than mites. Kelthane is an effective control for this pest.

You may find it difficult to rebloom a cyclamen. So, enjoy the flowers and nice foliage while they last and then discard it for a more suitable warm-weather plant in the spring.