

How to Care for Holiday Plants

The holiday season is always brighter when flowering plants are brought into the home. Today's choices for color and interest go far beyond the traditional; a visit to your local florist or garden center could prove to be a real eye-opener. And when you do visit, you'll find many of the old timers are still there...and what would the holiday season be without the poinsettia?

But instead of the traditional red, how would you react to a yellow poinsettia, like the "Lemon Drop" poinsettia, as your holiday centerpiece?

Poinsettias

Poinsettias are probably the most popular holiday plants. They are not easy plants to grow under normal house conditions.

Key poinsettia points:

- ❖ Daytime temperatures should be about 70-75° F and night temperatures not below 65° F.
- ❖ Always avoid exposing these plants to a draft or excessive drying heat!
- ❖ Many times poinsettias drop their leaves due to poor nutrition.



Glossary

- ❖ **Hardiness**-- The lowest temperatures at which a plant will survive.
- ❖ **Short day plants**-- Plants that bloom when day length is less than 12 hours.
- ❖ **Bract**-- A modified leaf found at the base of a flower.

A weekly fertilization with 20-20-20 soluble fertilizer should help. Draft and heat conditions mentioned above also cause excessive leaf drop. When the plant is through flowering, the best advice is to discard it. However, gardeners who love a challenge can tackle their poinsettia and attempt another year of flowering.

Norfolk Island Pine

Norfolk island pines may be seen on display with lovely decorations. Although they look like outdoor "Christmas trees," they are tropical plants that will be happy indoors if you attend to their needs.

Key care points:

- ❖ They like an area away from direct sunlight, but with bright light (south windows with sheer curtains, close to an east or west window, not more than four feet away).
- ❖ North windows are not bright enough.
- ❖ Cool temperatures at night (50-55 degrees F) and 60-70 degrees F during the day are adequate.
- ❖ Even moisture is important. Don't keep soil too wet or root rot may set in.

Underwatering may show up as browning on leaf tips. Fertilize lighter than most houseplants -- two applications of soluble houseplant fertilizer a year will

continued on next page ►

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suffice. Be sure not to give them any sudden change in temperature or light -- this includes bringing them home from the garden center on a cold December day without any covering!



Cyclamen

Cyclamen are really tubers that must have specific light, temperature and dormancy requirements met before you can successfully grow them. Cyclamen provide a wonderful display of flowers ranging from white to deep rose and some varieties are fragrant.

Key care points:

- ❖ Cool locations make them happiest.
- ❖ Keep away from direct sun in a well-drained soil mix kept moist but not soggy. As with many houseplants, over-watering will rot the roots.
- ❖ Wilting from under-watering will certainly keep growth in check.
- ❖ It's best not to keep Cyclamen for more than one season. Cyclamen mites, thrips and aphids may be pests on these plants. If so, isolate them until they are through flowering and then discard.

Did you know...

- ❖ Despite popular belief, poinsettias are NOT poisonous.
- ❖ Cyclamen is also called the 'Poor Man's Orchid'
- ❖ The way to tell a Christmas Cactus from an Easter or Thanksgiving cactus is by its leaf structure.

Care of alternative holiday plants

A local search for holiday plants could turn up Kalanchoe, Christmas cactus, Christmas pepper, Jerusalem cherry and the like. And as lovely as these plants are, many homeowners could be disappointed when their gifts begin to decline after a short period of time.

Read through the following guidelines to help you select the proper plant and the care it should be given.

Kalanchoes

Kalanchoes, with their succulent leaves, are known as short day plants. They won't bloom unless the day length is less than 12 hours, beginning in October. This corresponds nicely with our natural daylight and short days. Kalanchoes will bloom for a month or more with clusters of small, showy, red, pink or orange flowers.



[continued on next page](#) ➤

How to Care for Holiday Plants

Key care tips:

- ❖ They enjoy bright light and a well-drained soil mix that dries out slightly between waterings.
- ❖ Powdery mildew can be a problem when they are grown in high humidity. This is another reason why they should be relatively trouble-free in the dryness of our homes in winter.

Christmas peppers & Jerusalem cherries

Christmas peppers and Jerusalem cherries have brightly colored fruits. For best performance, keep the plants in full sun with uniform soil moisture. To prolong the life of the fruits, keep temperatures on the cool side. When the fruit has dropped, it's best to discard the plant due to ungainly growth that does not flower. (Do not eat the fruit!)



Christmas cactus

Last, but not least, is the Christmas cactus, *Schlumbergera bridgesii*. Care while they are in bloom is not difficult. The trick in growing Christmas cactus is getting it to flower a second year.

Key care points:

- ❖ Be sure to keep them away from drafts, avoid changing temperature and minimize turning and moving plants. These steps will stop flowers from dropping prematurely.
- ❖ From April to June, give it indirect light and plenty of water.
- ❖ A monthly fertilization program at this time is also recommended.
- ❖ July and August are the months to keep Christmas cactus on the dry side, outdoors. This helps initiate bud development.
- ❖ Bring them in by September 1 and start the dark treatment they need until December. All light must be kept off them from 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. for eight to ten weeks (in a closet or black plastic bag).
- ❖ Water sparingly.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. *What's the safest way for me to buy poinsettias and get them home?*

A. Poinsettias need to be sleeved or bagged before leaving the garden center. Don't walk outside without the plant being protected from cold, frosty air. It's best to make the garden center the last stop of the day as you head home. Handle poinsettias carefully; their branches can be fragile and break. Many growers will stake and tie the branches of larger plants for support. The leaves should cover the stakes and string, so there's no need to remove.

continued on next page ►

