

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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After Christmas is over, what do you do with the Christmas pepper and Jerusalem cherry that was either a decoration or a gift? Here is some information about these plants as well as how to care for them.

Both of these plants are members of the Solanaceae family, as are your regular peppers, tomatoes and potatoes. They are commonly available during the holiday season and are a colorful addition to any plant lover's home.

The Christmas pepper usually has cone-shaped fruit that may be orange, red, purple, green, yellow or white. You may occasionally see a plant with cherry-like, round fruit. All of these peppers are edible, but are likely to be quite hot, so be sure to keep them out of the reach of small children!

The Christmas pepper will live for no more than one year and most likely will not last that long unless cooler room temperatures, adequate light and sufficient water are provided. These are essential.

Cooler temperatures, such as in an unheated room, are helpful in extending a Christmas pepper's decorative appearance. The plant also requires good light. A west or south-facing window will meet this requirement. If you do not supply sufficient light, lower leaves will likely yellow and fall off. Lack of fertilizer can also contribute to early leaf drop, so it is appropriate to feed plants every two weeks or so with a houseplant fertilizer.

After 8-12 weeks, the mature fruit will begin to wrinkle and fall off. When all fruit have fallen, the plant can be discarded, as it is an annual plant.

The Jerusalem cherry, however, is a woody perennial plant. It is grown as an ornamental shrub outdoors in climates that have warmer winter temperatures than ours.

Indoors, this plant also needs bright light, plenty of water and a little fertilizer every couple of weeks. Temperatures above 70 degrees F. and air that is dry are likely to reduce the plant's vitality. Keep the soil evenly moist, but avoid letting the bottom of the pot sit in excess water.

The fruit of this plant looks very similar to a cherry tomato, but is not considered edible so, as with your Christmas pepper, keep away from small children.

After it warms up in spring, and danger of frost is past, you may replot your Jerusalem cherry into a slightly larger pot and put it outdoors. Prune it back about halfway. This will stimulate bushy new growth. Place it in a partly sunny location. Then, keep it well-watered, fertilize regularly, and protect it from slugs. By the time you bring it back inside next fall, it should be covered with fruit again, ready to brighten up the holidays.

It is possible to plant Jerusalem cherry in the ground at lower elevations in western Washington, though it will behave more like an herbaceous perennial than a shrub here. It should receive 4-6 hours of sun daily, ample water and an occasional feeding.

Though stems will be killed during the winter, the crown and roots are hardy and if well mulched, should grow new shoots the following spring. The new shoots should flower during the summer and set fruit that will color up in fall.

Be sure you mulch heavily in the fall. Four to six inches of bark or other organic material that stays in place will do. In spring, do not prune off winter-killed branches until new growth starts. Then prune them back to the crown.

If treated properly, Jerusalem cherry plants in containers or in the ground can last several years.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.