

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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Many people receive gift plants like poinsettia, Amaryllis, and Kalanchoe during the holiday season. The first and most critical factor in the care of these gift plants is drainage. Either remove the colored wrappings these plants usually come with, or turn the pots over and poke several holes through. Check to be sure the plant drains when you water, because water held at root level can ruin these plants.

Poinsettia is a favorite holiday gift plant that is actually tropical in nature. The color we perceive as “flowering” is really a leaf color change. These leaves are called “bracts”. Poinsettias will retain their bright color for several weeks or even months, if properly cared for. Keep them in a uniformly warm place with temperatures between 65 degrees and 70 degrees, with no drafts. Plants do not need fertilizer during the period of leaf color. Water poinsettias when the soil at the top of the pot dries out slightly, being sure to water the entire surface. Standing the pot in a pan of tepid water and letting it take up water from the bottom is a good option. A pebble tray may be used to keep plant from standing in water.

Amaryllis also require warm temperatures. Keep them moist and water when the soil surface becomes dry. Be sure not to let them stand in water. The flower stalks of Amaryllis come up before the leaves and produce large, showy flowers. When you see leaves begin to appear on your Amaryllis, cut off the old flower stalk and fertilize every two weeks with any liquid houseplant fertilizer. Leaf growth will continue through the summer and the plant can spend the summer outside, in bright sunlight. If the plant is allowed to go completely dormant at the end of August and left without any water for 2-3 months, you should be rewarded with another year’s bloom cycle. Just repot and begin watering again.

Kalanchoe and Christmas cactus are two other types of gift plants that enjoy the same light, warm conditions as poinsettias and Amaryllis. Kalanchoe is a succulent with thick leaves that bears bright clusters of orange, red or yellow flowers. Be careful not to overwater these, as they do not require as much water as poinsettias. Christmas cactus is a catch-all term for several different plants of tropical origin. These plants have stiff cactus-like branches from which brilliant blooms dangle. Most of these are members of the genus Schlumbergera and should be kept evenly watered, but not soggy, while in bloom.

These plants can all be grouped together, which will help maintain even humidity and contribute elegance and beauty to your home long after the holidays, if you water them correctly and give them the warm temperatures they require for optimum performance.

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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.