

# Holiday Gift Plants

By Jessamyn Tuttle  
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## A wonderful Christmas surprise

It seems like most people have someone on their holiday shopping list who is impossible to shop for. Why not give the gift of plants this holiday season? If the recipients are already gardeners, they will love something new to grow, and if they aren't yet into gardening they can simply consider your gift a long-lasting bouquet.

A plant in full bloom might be the best gift for many people, but if the recipients are gardeners or houseplant enthusiasts, they might prefer to bring the plant into bloom themselves. If the latter, then a kit containing an *Amaryllis* bulb or paperwhite *Narcissus* would be ideal. It can be great fun to watch a bulb change from a dry, brown knob to a fountain of greenery culminating in a glorious floral display.

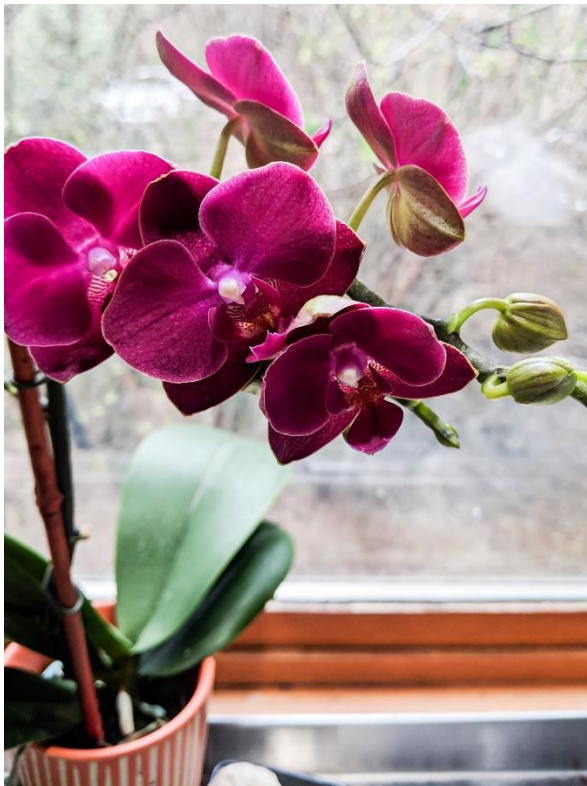
*Amaryllis* (aka *Hippeastrum*) make a major splash with their huge trumpet flowers rising above strap-like leaves. Available in pure white ranging to deep red, *Amaryllis* bloom in the deepest part of winter, often putting up multiple bloom spikes through the season. The bulbs are frequently sold in gift packs with a cute pot or basket, making them extremely simple to grow; or they can be purchased already planted. Part of the fun is watching the flower stalk extend (so fast you can almost see it grow), then unfold its huge flowers. *Amaryllis* need very bright light and a spot out of reach of cats or dogs. While it's possible to keep the bulbs and rebloom them for the following year, most people treat them as disposable once bloom is over.

Paperwhite *Narcissus*, a daffodil relative, is one of the easiest flowers of all to grow. Whether planted in soil or simply placed in a vase or bowl with pebbles and water, paperwhites provide enjoyment and anticipation as they grow, then blossom into beautiful white flowers of intense fragrance. Start bulbs 4-6 weeks ahead of time to have flowers for a special holiday. Paperwhite bulbs only bloom once so can be discarded or composted after flowering.

Poinsettias are the classic Christmas plant decoration, with large colorful bracts in deep red, pink, or white (or even speckled). However, they can be tricky to rebloom and they have a tendency to get infested with spider mites or whitefly indoors, so for most people these may be a single-season decoration.

Thanksgiving cactus and Christmas cactus are names often used interchangeably, especially confusing when the plants don't necessarily bloom right on schedule, but they are indeed different plants. *Schlumbergera truncata* is the fall-blooming Thanksgiving cactus, while

Christmas cactus is a hybrid called *Schlumbergera x buckleyi*. These cacti, despite their name, are not desert plants at all. Natives of the rain forest, they are epiphytes that naturally grow on trees or rocks and thrive on humidity. They are very forgiving of most indoor climates, but they are happiest when given bright indirect light and regular water. As houseplants they can be incredibly long-lived, but getting them to rebloom involves specific temperatures and/or periods of darkness. If you purchase a plant in bud, be aware that sometimes moving the plant will cause bud drop. Fortunately, they often produce a second bloom in late winter or early spring.



Nothing looks as elegant as a blooming orchid on the holiday table. Photo by Jessamyn Tuttle / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.

orchids. *Phalaenopsis* orchids (also called moth orchids), bought in bloom, can hold onto their flowers for months, and nothing looks as elegant as a blooming orchid on the holiday table. They are relatively easy to grow and make a great “gateway” orchid (that is, luring the recipient into an orchid hobby).

Before choosing a plant as a gift, care should be taken not to place a poisonous plant into an environment where small children or pets might be hurt. *Cyclamen*, *Amaryllis* and *Narcissus* are all toxic. Poinsettia, although it has a reputation for being poisonous, is not particularly dangerous unless the sap makes extended contact with skin or eyes. Consider the home you are sending the plant into.

It’s also good to keep in mind what else might come along with that beautiful plant. The most common insect problems indoors tend to be aphids, scale, mealybugs, spider mites and fungus

*Cyclamen*, purchased in full bloom, are a beautiful choice for the holiday table and beyond, as they can flower all winter. They also have beautifully patterned leaves, adding to the show. While there are hardy cyclamen that can grow outdoors, the ones usually available in stores around the holidays are *Cyclamen persicum*, which are too tender to reliably grow outside in our region. *Cyclamen* do best with indirect light and consistent watering.

*Tillandsia*, also called “air plants,” are becoming extremely popular and great for collectors. Requiring no soil or even a pot, they can simply be kept in glass bowls or other display vessels, then immersed in a bucket of water once a week or so. There are over 600 species of *Tillandsia* with a fascinating range of shapes and colors, as well as varying care requirements.

Other wonderful plants to give as gifts include flowering jasmine, lucky bamboo, many varieties of succulents, and, of course,

gnats. The best defense is a good offense, so check new plants carefully for signs of pests or disease before introducing them into someone's home.

Giving the gift of plants will, at the very least, brighten someone's home for a few weeks. And you never know if your gift might lead someone down the path to gardening.

### **RESOURCES:**

- WSU Pestsense
- Safe and Poisonous Garden Plants, UC Davis  
[https://ucanr.edu/sites/poisonous\\_safe\\_plants/files/154528.pdf](https://ucanr.edu/sites/poisonous_safe_plants/files/154528.pdf)
- <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/PlantFinder/PlantFinderDetails.aspx?taxonid=253152&isprofile=0>
- <https://www.chicagobotanic.org/plantcollections/plantfinder>



Poinsettias are a tradition during the holiday season.  
*Photo by Jessamyn Tuttle / WSU Skagit County  
Extension Master Gardeners.*