

SPRING HOLIDAY GIFT PLANTS

Flowering plants are available for year-round purchase, especially at holidays. Many people enjoy such plants during their prime and discard them when they have finished blooming. Others prefer the challenge of keeping a plant growing until it blooms again. However, many of these plants require growing conditions that may be difficult to meet in the average home.

AZALEAS (*Rhododendron simsii*)

Azaleas require good light but will not tolerate direct sun. A night temperature of 45-60°F will keep the blooms in good shape. The soil must be kept moist, as azaleas cannot stand wilting. It is especially important to keep azaleas away from heating ducts, radiators and other heat sources.

Greenhouse azaleas are not hardy for outdoor culture in the Inland Northwest. To keep an azalea as a potted plant, allow it to spend summer outdoors and keep it well watered and fertilized with an acid plant fertilizer. During the summer, it will form flower buds, which will bloom during the winter season if the plant can be given a 6-8-week cold treatment in the fall at temperatures from 35-50°F. In December or January, the plant can be brought into a well-lit room and it should bloom again. Unless you can provide these strict conditions, it is probably wiser not to attempt to keep a greenhouse azalea over more than one season.

CYCLAMEN (*Cyclamen persicum*)

These plants require very bright light and cool temperatures (50-60°F), especially at night. Keep the soil continually moist. Wilting will cause leaves to yellow and flowers and buds to dry up. This will also happen if night temperatures are too high. Water carefully so that water does not get on the crown of the plant. Repeated wetting of the crown will often cause rot. Pick off spent flower stalks daily by pulling them gently from the crown. Avoid cutting them or you will be left with a mass of dead flower stalks in the center of the plant.

In spring, the plant will begin its resting cycle by producing fewer and fewer leaves. Let the plant dry out and store it in a cool spot with low light. During the latter part of August, re-pot the tuber in new soil, leaving about one-third of it showing above the soil line. Begin watering slowly at first, then increase water as soon as new leaves begin to show. Bring the plant indoors to a brightly lit spot before frost. The plant should be fertilized every three weeks and kept moist in a cool location. Flowers should come on for the Christmas season.

GLOXINIA (*Sinningia*)

This plant thrives best in bright light but will not tolerate full midday sun in summer. It prefers warmer temperatures at night than many other plants (65-70°F). Soil should be kept moist and not allowed to dry out. Insufficient light, too high temperatures, low humidity, and irregular watering will cause problems such as bud blast, rot and legginess.

When the plant has finished flowering, the tuber needs to rest. Store tubers in dry pots at reasonably cool temperatures (60°F). New sprouts will usually appear in 2-4 months, at which time the tubers can be re-potted in a fresh soil mixture and watering resumed. Some gloxinias, however, do not go through dormancy periods

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and grow constantly. If a plant doesn't show signs of entering dormancy, don't attempt to force it. Let it continue to grow.

EASTER LILIES (*Lilium longiflorum*)

After the lily has finished blooming and the blossoms have withered, cut the flower stems back to the top foliage. Place the plant where it receives bright light and water when the soil is dry.

When all danger of frost has passed, move the plant to a flowerbed. Lilies need full sunlight and fertile, well-drained soil. Protection from strong winds is recommended. Work a handful of bone meal or bulb meal into the soil below the bulb. Carefully remove the plant from its container so the top doesn't break away from the bulb. Plant the soil ball slightly deeper than it was planted in the pot. If the plant has a tall stem, support it with a stake driven into the planting hole.

The top will eventually die down when the bulb has matured and the plant will go into dormancy. The lily will emerge the following spring and bloom in July.

EASTER CACTUS (*Schlumbergera gaertneri*)

The botanical name of this houseplant along with its cousin, the Christmas cactus, is enough to give anyone a headache. Don't worry though, where as many houseplants are called by both their scientific and common name, this plant is almost always known as the **Whitsun** or **Easter Cactus**.

Names aside, it has beautiful knock out flowers that typically bloom during March and April. When not flowering, the plant looks very like the **Christmas Cactus** and although both types are quite easy to care for and get flowering again the following year, the **Easter Cactus** is somewhat less popular as a houseplant.

FLORIST HYDRANGEA (*Hydrangea macrophylla*)

Also, known as bigleaf hydrangea. Big clusters of blue, pink or white flowers.

These hydrangeas have become popular florist plants, forced into flower for holidays ranging from Valentine's Day to Memorial Day. The showy, sterile flowers that make up the rounded inflorescence may be white or various tints and intensities of pink or blue.

Hydrangea flower color depends on soil pH and the availability of aluminum ions. An acid pH (5.2-5.5), created by the addition of aluminum sulfate, results in a deep blue color. Pink to red cultivars need a pH above 6 and ample amounts of phosphorus, which competes with the aluminum ions.

For an extended floral display in your home, keep your potted hydrangea well-watered in a cool room (less than 70°F) and with ample bright, indirect light. However, a florist's hydrangea in bloom cannot be expected to bloom again that same year. Don't expect much in the way of bloom on a young hydrangea planted outdoors for the first two to three years.