



WINTER 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.

POINSETTIA (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*)

The newer varieties of poinsettia should hold their bracts for several months if the right conditions are provided. They require bright light and a draft-free atmosphere. Temperatures between 65-75°F are ideal. Temperatures above and below these for any appreciable length of time will cause the plant to deteriorate. Poinsettias need to be well watered but not left in saturated soil. Water when the surface of the soil begins to dry out. Pour away any excess water that drains into the saucer under the pot. Poinsettias will not thrive in dark corners of a room nor will they survive dry conditions that cause them to wilt.

In the spring after all danger of frost is past, place the poinsettia outdoors where it is sunny, but avoid direct sun during the hottest part of the day. Prune all branches back to within 6 inches of the soil line and if necessary, re-pot in a larger container. Throughout the summer growing period, a half-strength houseplant fertilizer should be applied every 2-3 weeks. Keep tips pinched back to encourage branching. In mid-September, bring the poinsettia back into the house and maintain it in a well-lighted area.

To prepare it to set flower buds that will be in bloom during the Christmas season, all artificial light must be excluded from the plant for 16 hours each day. Either cover the plant with a lightproof box each evening or place it in an unlit room or closet in absolute darkness. Even a momentary flash of light will interrupt the necessary dark period and inhibit the setting of flower buds.

The following is a general time schedule for handling poinsettias:

Mid-September: Bring the plant inside and place in a draft-free area where the temperature does not drop below 60°F.

Early October: Begin giving the plant long nights (complete darkness from 5 pm until 8 am).

Mid-November: Color should be showing in the bracts.

Early December: Bract color should be almost complete; plant can be brought into ordinary light.

During the "bloom" forcing period, keep the temperature between 60-70°F. The plant should receive all possible sunlight during the day. Reduce fertilizer applications since the plant grows less while in the house. If possible, avoid spraying the plant with chemicals after the bracts begin to develop color. Keeping a poinsettia from one year to the next takes effort, but may be worthwhile for a special variety or color.

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AMARYLLIS (*Hippeastrum*)

Bulbs are usually available from fall to early winter. Select the largest bulb available for more stocks and blooms the first year. The bulb should be firm and dry with no signs of mold, decay or injury. The bulb should be planted in a container that is one inch larger than the base of the bulb. Plant only the lower one-third to one-half of the bulb below the soil line. Best growth will occur in bright light at a temperature of 60-70°F.

The flower stalk will appear first, followed by leaves. When the flowers have faded, cut the stalk off and maintain the foliage. Keep the soil moist but not soggy. Water when the top inch of soil is dry. In the spring after all danger of frost is past, place the pot outdoors in a partially shaded location. Feed every two weeks and keep well-watered. At the end of August or beginning of September, the leaves will begin to yellow and dry up. Cease watering and store the plant indoors in a cool, dry place. No water should be provided for 2-3 months.

After this period, the bulbs can be re-potted in a slightly larger container and brought into a warm, brightly lit room again. Begin watering to stimulate the floral stalk and repeat the cycle.

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.

KALANCHOE (*Kalanchoe blossfeldiana*)

There are many brightly colored flower varieties of this popular plant. It is a short-day plant that requires a long period of absolute darkness in late summer and fall to set buds and flower for the Christmas season. Provide bright light, in sun if possible, and allow the soil ball to dry out between waterings. Over-watering will cause spindly growth and eventual rot. This species should be treated like other succulent plants from dry environments.

CHRISTMAS CACTUS (*Schlumbergera x buckleyi*)

THANKSGIVING CACTUS (*Schlumbergera geratruncha*)

Although the Christmas cactus is a true cactus, it does require different growing conditions than cactus species that have originated in drier environments. The Christmas cactus evolved in tropical forests where it grows up in trees, much like orchids do. It requires a more consistent supply of moisture at its roots and should be potted in a fast-draining organic mixture.

This plant will do well in average household temperatures but it does need bright light. Filtered sunlight will not hurt the plant, provided it does not sit in the direct rays of the summer sun. Water when the top of the soil begins to dry out. Place outdoors during the period of active growth during the summer and fertilize every two to three weeks with half-strength houseplant fertilizer. To stimulate flower initiation, bring back into the house at the end of September and provide the same light treatment as given to the poinsettia.

AZALEAS (*Rhododendron simii*)

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.

CHRISTMAS PEPPERS (*Capsicum annuum*) and **JERUSALEM CHERRIES** (*Solanum pseudocapsicum*)

These plants are related to vegetable peppers; however, their fruit is not recommended for eating. The green fruits of the cherry are considered toxic. The peppers are extremely hot.

Both species need bright, sunny conditions with temperatures from 60-75°F. Soil needs to be kept evenly moist. Dry soil will cause wilting and subsequent loss of leaves and fruit. Over-watering will also cause leaves to fall.

The pepper is an annual plant and when it begins to show signs of severe decline, it is best discarded. The cherry can be placed outdoors in summer, pruned back about half, and kept well-watered and fertilized throughout the summer. Pinching new growth will keep it bushy. In the fall before frost occurs, bring it indoors and provide it with the conditions outlined above.