

Holiday Plants

It may seem early to start thinking about holiday plants, but unless care is given to them now, they will not provide you with outstanding blooms by December. Using Christmas cactus, poinsettia, and amaryllis as part of your holiday décor is a great way to provide terrific color and have beautiful plants in your home during a time of year when there isn't much blooming.

If you have a Christmas cactus, it is already time to start the process of forcing it to bloom for the winter season. Christmas cactuses form flower buds in the autumn as day length decreases and darkness increases. These succulent plants generally bloom from November until March, depending on the species. Water and feed your cactus normally from early autumn on. Starting in mid-October provide the plant with at least 14-16 hours of continuous darkness each day for at least 3 to 6 weeks. A dark plastic garbage bag or box placed over the plant will do nicely if you are unable to provide a darkened room or closet. Remember to remove the bag or box during the day to provide normal light conditions. This should encourage the plant to set buds. Stop covering the plant when the buds look large and full. Night temperatures of 65 to 68 degrees will also encourage good bud formation and prolong the time the flowers will show good color. Provide adequate water and low-nitrogen plant food during bud formation and blooming. Using these techniques, your plant should be ready to provide a beautiful floral display by mid-December.



If you saved a poinsettia from last year's holidays, October is the time to start coaxing it back into bloom. Bring the plant indoors before evening temperatures dip into the mid-50's if you've kept it outside for the summer. Check for and eliminate any pesky critters the poinsettia may have picked up on its summer vacation outdoors. Beginning in late October, put it in total darkness for approximately 15 hours daily. Cover the plant with a black plastic bag or a box to prevent any light from getting in, but remove the bag/box during the day. People often forget to cover the plant one or two nights. Interrupting the darkness by even a few minutes

may make the difference between blooming or not blooming. Keep the soil evenly moist and use a complete fertilizer every two weeks until January. By mid-November the bracts (the modified leaves that we all think of as the flower) should start to show color. Stay on your long-night schedule. In early December, the bracts should be enlarged and fully colored. Set the plant where you'd like to display it. Once the bracts are colored, light won't hurt their show. Keep the plant in a sunny area in temperatures of about 60 to 70 degrees, and don't forget to water regularly and thoroughly. If the pot is wrapped in decorative foil, punch holes in the bottom to ensure proper

drainage or better yet, place the pot in a nice ceramic container with pebbles in the bottom for drainage. Bringing a poinsettia back into bloom can be a tedious job, but one that is fun for anyone looking for a challenge. Not up to the challenge? Purchase a new poinsettia for the holidays!

Amaryllis bulbs make a beautiful floral statement when used for decorating during the holidays and add color and cheerfulness in the otherwise gray winter. Bulbs are available starting in late September and can be brought into bloom from late fall until early spring. It takes from 6 to 8 weeks after planting for blooms to appear. Purchase large, firm bulbs, which show only the scars or stubs of old foliage, but no new leaves. Use a light, well-drained potting mixture containing some peat moss. The pot itself should have good drainage and be about 3 to 4 inches wider than the bulb. The potting mixture should be about 1 inch below the rim of the pot and about 1/3 of the bulb should show above soil level.

Day temperatures should be 64 to 77 degrees and at night 5 to 10 degrees cooler. Water sparingly until the first shoots appear. Once growth begins, water whenever the soil is dry, making sure it is evenly moist but not overly wet. Turning the pot every few days will keep the foliage growth balanced. Once the buds appear, it may be necessary to stake plants with larger blooms. Moving the pot to a cooler place with less direct light will prolong the blooming season.



Other Sites of Interest

The Amaryllis – Ohio State University Gardenline Online

[Care of Christmas Cactus Important After Holidays](#) – Purdue University Consumer Horticulture