

Three favorite Christmas plants and how to care for them

by Claudia Steen

Christmas Cactus

Did you receive a Christmas Cactus for the holidays and don't know how to care for it? It is quite easy. Place in a cool location, out of drafts, away from windows, heat vents, and exterior doors. Don't let it freeze. Let the top inch of soil go dry between watering. *Do not overwater!* Like most tropical plants, a Christmas Cactus likes humidity and will respond well to a saucer filled with water and gravel under the pot. After the plant is finished blooming, put it



in a cool room and limit water for 30 days. It is normal for a few leaves to fall off during this time. If the plant receives 12 hours each night of uninterrupted darkness it will encourage re-blooming. Also, temperatures of 50°-55° F. will help trigger bud formation. This can be accomplished by sitting the plant near a window and turning 1/4 turn each day. Plants seem to flower best when kept pot bound. Then just sit back and enjoy!

Poinsettias

Most poinsettias end up in the garbage or compost after the holidays. Admittedly they are a little difficult to care for and coaxing them to re-bloom takes dedication and vigilance. But for those up to the challenge, the results can be stunningly rewarding.



Ideally, poinsettias prefer 60° to 70° with about six hours of indirect light a day. Extremes and fluctuation in temperature will cause leaf drop, so when bringing your new poinsettia home, protect it from the cold and position it away from cold windows and warm or cold drafts. Only water when the soil is dry and remove decorative foil for good drainage. Never let it sit in standing water.

When leaves drop, usually by early spring, prune back to eight inches, repot, and continue to water and fertilize the plant. After new growth appears and while nighttime

temperatures are above 55°, pots can be put outside. Continue fertilizing and pruning to keep plants healthy and compact. Stop pruning in August.

Now comes the fun! Beginning in October cover plants each night for 14 hours of uninterrupted dark (black plastic works great) – then uncover and expose to bright light for six to eight hours a day, keeping temps between 60° to 70°. Follow this regime for eight to 10 weeks for brilliantly colored bracts by the holidays. Tip! Don't fertilize your plant while in bloom. With proper care, you will enjoy your poinsettia for years.

Mistletoe

How did we get attracted to mistletoe for the kissing ability it has when it is considered a parasite . . . well a partial parasite at least. It does grow on trees, puts its roots into the tree limbs and steals nutrients and moisture from those limbs. However, it is only partially parasitic as it will grow on the ground as well.

There are two types of mistletoe: the one we are familiar with at Christmas time is *Phoradendron flavescens*, and this variety is native to North America. Phoradendron is a Greek word for tree thief. It is classified as a woody shrub, has oval shaped leaves and berries that could be red, orange, yellow or white. The berries are poisonous to humans, but birds love them. Mistletoe grows on conifers, and deciduous trees and shrubs in wooded forest areas. As the mistletoe grows on branches, it often grows into large masses of branches and stems and is known as witch's brooms. Many birds such as finches, chickadees, and nuthatches nest in these rounded masses of mistletoe. Three species of butterflies lay their eggs on mistletoe and their young eat the leaves.



From early history, mistletoe has held some mystery and has been used for many rituals and was helpful to support life, promote fertility and protection against poison. It was also hung-over doorways to ward off evil spirits.

But what about the ritual of getting kissed under the mistletoe? In early Greek festivals, it was believed to bestow fertility and in Scandinavia it was considered a plant of peace where enemies could declare a truce and fighting spouses could kiss and make up. Kissing under the mistletoe was practiced early in the United States and was mentioned in an 1820 book of essays and stories by Washington Irving. In his book, each time a couple kissed under the mistletoe, they removed one of the berries and when the berries were all gone, so was the sprig's 'kissing' power.

The Master Gardener program wishes all of you are Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.