

Christmas Plants

By Claudia Steen

Poinsettias

The plant we know botanically as *Euphorbia pulcherrima* has long been part of the Christmas tradition. The brilliant red stars aren't actual flowers, but are bracts, or modified leaves. The flowers are small, greenish, and clustered in the bract's center. Each has a yellow nectary. These days, hybridizers have given us Poinsettias colored creamy white, pink, and bright orange; and patterned in red and white, pink and white, or green and white. As spectacular as they are in December, Poinsettias fade fast after Christmas. Expect the plant to drop some of its bracts and leaves after those yellow flowers shed their pollen. And when it comes to getting them to re-bloom again, Poinsettias are notoriously tricky. It's all about photoperiodism. 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 rewarding. By 1938, new research revealed that it wasn't day length that triggered the seasonal flowering response, but rather an uninterrupted dark period. By then, the terms relating to photoperiodism were cast in stone, and are still used today. Short-day plants are really responding to long nights, while long-day plants are triggered by short nights. This process is exquisitely sensitive. In some plants, if the critical period of darkness is interrupted by as little as a one-minute exposure to light from a 25-watt bulb, flowering will not occur. It's all about darkness. This is why it's so challenging for home gardeners to get short-day Poinsettias to re-bloom indoors, where artificial light extends the day. If you're up for a challenge and get lucky, following these steps may lead to a Poinsettia that will re-bloom next Christmas.

Make sure the foil wrapper has been removed from the pot. Drainage is important. Move the pot to a cool location with some indirect light, and water when the top 1" of soil feels dry. The goal is to keep the plant alive, without stimulating new growth. When all danger of frost has passed, move the plant outdoors to a bright, morning sun location. Cut the stems back to about 6 inches and repot the plant into a slightly larger container. As new shoots grow, pinch the tips of the stems to make the plant bushier. Stop pinching about September 1. Water and fertilize regularly. October 1, or before nighttime temperatures drop below 40 degrees, bring the plant indoors. It will need 14 hours of continuous, uninterrupted darkness each night. Try an unused closet or cover the plant with a box that admits no stray light. Remember, nurseries have lost whole greenhouses full of Poinsettias when a light was accidentally turned on at night. Bring the plant out for 10 hours of bright, indirect light during the day. Continue to water and fertilize. By early November your plants should be developing color, and you can end the daily darkness routine and keep the plants in bright, indirect light. By the end of November, your Poinsettia

should be re-blooming. Don't fertilize your plant while in bloom. With proper care, you will enjoy your poinsettia for years.

Christmas Cactus

Did you receive a Christmas Cactus for the holidays and don't know how to care for it? Well, it is actually 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, gravel under the pot or periodic misting. The most frequently asked question about a Christmas cactus is how to get it to bloom again. This takes some effort. Starting about October these plants need to have long uninterrupted periods of darkness, about 12 hours each night, to bloom for the holidays. This can be accomplished by placing the plant in a closet from about eight each night to eight in the morning. Another successful way that takes less labor is to subject your plant to temperatures about 50-55 degrees from about

November to Christmas. This plant takes some effort but is worth it for that beautiful color so welcomed during our long winter. You do not need to fertilize while the plant is blooming.

After blooming you can prune the plant back which will cause it to branch out more. Remove a few sections of each stem by pinching them off with your fingers or cutting them with a sharp knife. You can root these cuttings in moist vermiculite to propagate new plants. After the plant is finished blooming, put it in a cool room and limit the 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.

Once summer comes you can move this plant outside but keep it in a shady or semi-shady location. The leaves will burn in direct sunlight. Be sure to bring it in before any chance of frost. With proper care you can enjoy these amazing Christmas Plants for years to come.

For any gardening questions - you are always welcome to contact our Master Gardener Clinic at 509-574-1604 or email gardener@co.yakima.wa.us.

