

Blooming Holiday Plants

Christmas trees aren't the only botanical addition to your holiday décor. Poinsettia's, Christmas cacti, Thanksgiving cacti and amaryllis can all add color and warmth to your home during and after the holiday season.

Amaryllis are available year-round but are most often grown in containers as winter-blooming plants. As with all plants, start with quality. Choose a firm bulb with no visible defects. Pot in a well-draining soil with 1/3 of the bulb protruding above the soil line and a thumb width between the bulb and the pot rim. Always water directly on the soil, not on the neck of the bulb. Thoroughly water after potting and keep the soil moist until flowering. During flowering, increase watering. Place the bulb in a sunny, warm window with temperatures between 70-75 degrees Fahrenheit. Once flowering begins, move it to a cooler location (40-60 degrees) and rotate so the flower stalk won't lean towards the light and become crooked. You should expect to see blooms approximately 6-8 weeks after potting. After all the flowers have bloomed (some stalks may produce up to 6 flowers) cut stalks at their base and keep soil moist for the rest of the winter. After the danger of frost has passed, set the plant outside in a sunny location. The plant will produce foliage but no flowers during the summer. Leave the summer foliage on until it's brown and crispy. In the fall, cut the leaves back and allow the bulb to "rest" in a cool, dark location for two months before beginning the process again. During the fall dormancy period, restrict water.

Christmas Cactus and Thanksgiving Cactus are both native to the jungles of South America. Christmas cactus normally has smooth stem segments, and Thanksgiving cactus has hook-like appendages on each segment. Both of these cacti prefer bright indirect light. Too much sun can result in the leaves turning yellow. Common household temperatures are fine and soil should be kept constantly moist but not waterlogged. During the fall, stop fertilizing, and give the plants only enough water so the stems do not shrivel in order to encourage flower bud formation. If possible, move the plants outside for the summer to a shady spot. Leave the plants outside until cooler temperatures set in. Normally, the plants will have received enough cool nights in the 50- to 55-degree range that flower buds will have formed. However, if they haven't, subjecting the plants to nights greater than 12 hours long and temperatures between 59 and 69 degrees can also generate flowers. Twenty-five consecutive long nights is enough for flower initiation. Place the plants in an unused room or cover them with a dark cloth or cardboard box to insure that they receive uninterrupted darkness. After the flower buds have formed, it takes an additional nine to ten weeks for flowers to completely development and bloom. After flowering fertilize lightly every other week until the following fall.

Given proper care, poinsettia can be an attractive houseplant for a long time. Place your poinsettia in a sunny window or the brightest area of the room, but don't let it touch cold window panes. The daytime temperature should be 65 to 75 degrees F. with 60 to 65 degrees at night. Move plants away from drafty windows at night or draw the drapes between them to avoid damage from the cold. Poinsettias are somewhat finicky with soil moisture. Avoid overwatering because poinsettias do not like "wet feet." On the other hand, if the plant is allowed to wilt, it will drop some leaves. So how do you maintain proper moisture? Examine the potting soil daily by sticking your finger about one-half inch deep into the soil. If it is dry to this depth, the plant needs water. Water the plant with lukewarm water until some water runs out of the drainage hole, but make sure to dump out any water that collects in the saucer or dish.

At times, a rumor is resurrected that poinsettias are poisonous to people or pets. It is unclear as to how this rumor began but it is false. There has never been a recorded case of poisoning from poinsettia. The

plant does secrete a milky latex sap when branches are broken and those with a latex allergy may be affected if they come in contact with the liquid. Often when questioning if houseplants are poisonous to animals or children, the best precaution is to keep *all* plants away from both. Some plants are toxic and some children or animals have an unknown allergy. It is never a good idea to let pets or children eat non-food items, including plants.

Proper care of these wintertime houseplants can brighten your décor and help to chase away the cold weather blues. For many, the time and effort it takes to get flowers and keep these plants alive can be too much. Don't feel bad if you buy plants this time of year and let them go after the holidays. Many plants sold in grocery stores are intended for just that! Whether you keep these plants all year or just enjoy them for a short time, the choice is yours. After all, there's only so much room for plants in your home. Getting rid of the old, makes room for the new!