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Extension Solutions for Homes and Gardens

by Paul J. Pugliese

“Post-Holiday Care of Gift Plants”

Many people give and receive a variety of ornamental plants during the holidays such as poinsettias, Christmas cacti, Christmas Kalanchoe, amaryllis bulbs, and miniature Christmas trees commonly known as Norfolk Island pine. Unfortunately, these plants often don't come with a lot of information on how to care for them. Also, many people make the mistake of leaving these plants outside without realizing that these plants are not very cold hardy and will quickly turn to mush with freezing winter temperatures. If you are one of these unlucky individuals, then you will have to accept the fact that these plants are now only useful for your compost bin. Take this as a lesson well-learned and look forward to another holiday gift plant next winter. Another option is to go out and buy these plants on sale after the holidays if you are up to the challenge.

Most holiday gift plants are actually tropical or subtropical plant species and prefer lots of sunlight (but not direct sunlight), average humidity around 25-50%, and warm temperatures averaging 65F at night to 75F in the day. Therefore, these plants can make excellent house plants if you have a sunny window. As with other house plants, you can take them outside in the summertime and leave them in containers around your patio or porches, but be sure to bring them inside before the first frost comes in the fall. When moving these plants outdoors in the spring, be sure to gradually acclimate them to avoid plant shock and sun scald. A shady patio or covered porch out of direct sunlight is a good place to start out for a few weeks before moving them to a more sunny location.

It's important to keep the soil moist, but not wet for holiday gift plants. Often these plants are wrapped in a festive foil or plastic, which is nice to keep them from dripping on your furniture. However, these wrapping materials are really bad about keep the soil too wet, which ultimately leads to root rot, leaf drop, and taking the plant to your compost bin. So, as soon as the holidays are over, be sure to take the gift wrap off of the container and make sure that there are good drainage holes in the bottom of the pot. Some of the fancier containers don't have holes and you may need to repot the plant or drill holes in the bottom. You can still add a plastic saucer or pan under the pot to catch any drips. However, these saucers should never hold standing water longer than a few minutes—just long enough for the soil to soak it up and then you can dump out the excess water. Most holiday plants should be watered only after the soil surface turns dry.

If your holiday gift plant produces flowers such as poinsettias, Christmas cacti, and amaryllis, you can often enjoy them for a few weeks before they begin to drop the flowers and go into a resting state. Often, these plants will bloom again later in the year if they are provided the right conditions. Keep in mind that some of these plants don't normally bloom at Christmas and will revert to a natural bloom cycle. These plants were forced in a greenhouse to bloom outside of their natural cycle. It will be very difficult for most homeowners to force plants to bloom on time for the holidays without being able to manipulate the amount of light and specific temperatures to regulate plant growth.

Amaryllis bulbs are actually cold hardy to zone 7b, which includes metro-Atlanta and areas further south. So, if you live in zone 7b or 8, you can plant bulbs outside in the fall to bloom in the spring (their natural flowering time). Bulbs that already flowered this winter can be gradually acclimated to the outdoors in spring and may bloom again later this year or next year.

Spring is a great time to repot and prune houseplants since they will often be able to grow very rapidly at this time, especially if they are moved outside. Most holiday plants will quickly outgrow their containers in the first year. So, if you want to keep them as houseplants, be sure to repot them this spring in a container that is about 1" inch wider than their current container. You can use any commercial potting soil labeled for houseplants available at local garden centers. These soils are easier to handle, sterile, and

lightweight. Don't use soil from your backyard since it is often heavy with clay and will hold too much moisture in a container. In the process of repotting your plant, you can take the opportunity to prune the plant if it has gotten gangly or overgrown. Of course, dead branches can be pruned out at any time. Poinsettias respond well to pruning and pinching, which will cause them to branch out more and create more flower bracts next winter.

For more information, see our UGA Extension publications B1318, Growing Indoor Plants with Success; C787, Gardening in Containers; and B1338, Gardening in Containers Using Tropical Plants. These publications can be found online at www.caes.uga.edu/publications or you can contact your local county Extension office for a printed copy by calling 1-800-ASK-UGA1. Other Extension factsheets and publications with detailed information on specific plants can be found at www.extension.org/search and typing the plant name in this custom search engine.

Paul Pugliese is the Agriculture & Natural Resources Extension Agent for Cherokee County Cooperative Extension, a partnership of The University of Georgia, The U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Cherokee County. (770) 479-0418. For more information and free publications, visit our local website at www.ugaextension.com/cherokee

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