

Care of Holiday & Gift Plants
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What better way to say “Seasons Greetings” than with the gift of a poinsettia. As far back as I can remember the poinsettia was as much of a sign of Christmas as the Christmas tree. When I started to see the bright red flowers in stores, shops and garden centers, I knew that school would be out soon, and someone would be “**coming to town**”. Over my past 40 plus years, these red flowers have been joined by white, pink, speckled and striped. I have even learned that the beautiful red flowers on the poinsettia are not even flowers at all. They are actually bracts or modified leaves which protect the small yellow flower in the center. It takes several months of special care to get those showy bracts to share their colors.

Even though the poinsettia is probably the most popular holiday plant, there are several other plants that can also spread beauty and cheer during the season. African violets, amaryllis, azalea, holiday cactus, Christmas pepper chrysanthemum, cyclamen, hydrangea and orchids make wonderful holiday gifts.

According to Paul Thomas and Mel Garber, UGA Extension Horticulturist, how long your holiday plants remain attractive may be directly related to the care they are given. Careful handling is also an important factor that may affect these plants. Here are a few more tips from them to get the most from your holiday plants.

Proper watering is critical. Large plants in small containers dry out quickly. Also, the relative humidity indoors tends to be quite low during the heating and air-conditioning seasons. Under these conditions, check plants daily. Over watering can be just as detrimental as under watering. Potted plants generally should not be watered until the soil is nearly dry to the touch. Then apply enough water that some drains from the bottom of the pot. The excess should be discarded.

Holiday and gift plants are often delivered in waterproof containers or wrapped in foil. If possible, remove these pot coverings or punch holes in the bottom to promote good drainage. Place the pot in a saucer to protect furniture. Misting plants is not advised and may result in increased foliar disease.

Supplying adequate light is also important for extending the life of holiday and gift plants. Place most potted plants where they will get high levels of indirect light. In the absence of natural light, most plants can be placed under lamps. Some plants, such as African violets and orchids, are grown successfully on artificially lighted shelves. Low light levels (150 foot candles or less) will hasten the decline of most indoor plants.

Normal household temperatures (60-75 degrees) are satisfactory for most plants. Cooler temperatures (60-65 degrees) lengthen the life of flowering plants, while extremely high temperatures (75-85 degrees) will usually shorten the display life. This is particularly true of forced bulbs, which decline rapidly in the heat. Some foliage plants are subject to chilling injury below 55 degree. Avoid fast temperature changes; put plants away from doors and heater and air-conditioner vents.

Many flowering plants, even under the best conditions, last only a few weeks. It is not necessary to fertilize them. Plants kept for several months, though, do benefit from occasional fertilizing. Water-soluble or slow-release types are easiest to use. Follow label directions.

Plants kept for a long time eventually outgrow their containers and need to be repotted. Prepared soil mixes are readily available. Choose a container, preferably one with drainage holes, proportional in size to the plant.

In next week's article, we will look at the individual care of some of our more popular holiday plants.

For more information on these and other related questions, call me at (706) 935-4211 or come by your Catoosa County Extension Office at 43 Maple Street, Ringgold.