

Holiday Plant Care

Flowering and foliage plants make welcome gifts. How long they remain attractive may be directly related to the care they are given. Careful handling is also an important factor that may affect these 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. Overwatering can be just as detrimental as underwatering. Pot plants generally should not be watered until the soil is nearly dry to the touch. Then apply enough water that it 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 with water 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 pot plants where they will get high levels of indirect light. In the absence of natural light, most plants can be placed under lamps.

Normal household temperatures (60 to 75 degrees) are satisfactory for most plants. Cooler temperatures (60 to 65 degrees) lengthen the life of flowering plants while extremely high temperatures (75 to 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 degrees. Avoid fast temperature changes; put plants away from doors and heater and air-conditioner vents.

The colorful bracts of poinsettias may stay bright for months if you care for them properly. Poinsettias can be reflowered although the procedure is demanding. To do it, keep the plant indoors until the danger of frost has passed, then move it outdoors. Remove the bracts when they wither and discolor. Keep the plant in high indirect light (morning sun/afternoon shade). Water and fertilize the plant often. Shape the plant as desired; prune it or pinch it to encourage branching. Bring the plant back indoors when night temperatures start to fall below 60 degrees. Continue to fertilize and water.

Starting October 1, give the plant fourteen hours of continuous darkness daily until bract color is well developed (mid-November). This can be done by placing the plant in a closet or covering it with a cardboard box. Any light during the dark period will delay or inhibit flowering. Night temperatures at this time should be between 60 to 70 degrees. During the remaining ten hours each day, give the plant maximum light. As you can see, growing a poinsettia from one year to the next requires a lot of work and most people simply buy a new plant each year.