

Extension Notes

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AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES

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With care some holiday plants can brighten your home throughout the year

The colorful plants you enjoy during the holidays can linger beyond the season. If you care for them, they may become a welcome addition to your houseplant collection.

Traditional Christmas plants, such as poinsettia, holiday cactus, Christmas pepper, kalanchoe, Jerusalem cherry or cyclamen, require a bright, sunny location in the home. Regular thorough watering whenever the soil is dry is also very important. A sunny location and regular watering are enough for these plants throughout December, but they will need more specialized care if you plan for them to flower again next year.

In January, decide whether to keep or discard your holiday plants. That decision is easy for Christmas pepper, Jerusalem cherry and chrysanthemum because they will not flower again in the home environment.

Holiday cactus, kalanchoe, or cyclamen can remain colorful through February with proper care. You may even keep them as houseplants after February if you provide the correct conditions. Holiday cacti are relatively easy to grow while kalanchoes and cyclamen are more difficult. While poinsettias may continue growing, they are difficult to bring into flower for the next holiday season and are best discarded.

The major difference you'll see in your holiday plant after a year will be its size. If you are successful, you may have plants with 40 to 50 flowers from the same plant that had only six to eight flowers the previous year. Holiday cacti with many flowers will be two to five times as large next year. Kalanchoe will also increase in size while cyclamen tend to stay compact.

For this season's poinsettias, choose plants with small, tightly clustered yellow buds in the center of the colorful leaf-like bracts commonly referred to as the flowers. Look for crisp, undamaged foliage. Water the plant when it feels dry and discard excess water in the saucer under the plant. Place the plant in a bright, naturally lit location with some direct sunlight. Keep the plant out of drafty areas and away from heat-producing appliances. After a few weeks, apply houseplant fertilizer according to the label directions. The colorful bracts may stay nice into January and February.

If you're wanting to make your poinsettia last, remove the faded flowers, bracts and dry leaves around St. Patrick's Day. Add more soil if the level in the pot seems low and fertilize again. Move the plant to the brightest window in your house; full sun is fine if you gradually allow the plant to adjust to higher light.

Around Mother's Day, your plant could be approaching three feet tall. Trim two to six inches off the branches to promote side branching. Repot in a larger container and move the plant outside to a location that receives full sun for at least six hours daily. Again, gradually introduce the plant to full sun and start in a shady area. Over a few weeks, gradually move the plant to higher light conditions. Fertilize the plant again in June. Trim your poinsettia again around July 4 and slightly increase the amount of fertilizer. Fertilize weekly August through September.

By Labor Day, the plant could be 3-5 feet tall. Prune it to a height of 18-24 inches. This will be your last chance to reduce the height. Around the first day of fall, Sept. 22, selectively remove the smallest new branches so that only 10-25 stems remain to produce flowers. This is also the time to move the plant indoors. The plant will need about 14 hours of uninterrupted darkness and 10 hours of bright sunlight daily. For example, place the plant in a light-free closet or under a box at 6 p.m. each evening and return it to the sunny window at 8 a.m. You can also place the plant in a little used south facing room, and do not turn the lights on from 6 p.m. to 8 a.m. daily. Any day you forget and accidentally turn the lights on will cause a delay in flowering.

Continue to water and apply fertilizer about every two weeks. Rotate the plant each day to give all sides even light. If the window does not get direct sun, you can supplement the daytime light with fluorescent or LED lights, but turn them off by 6 p.m.

Around Halloween, stop the day/night, light/dark treatment and keep the plant in a sunny area. Reduce fertilizer applications. The plant can remain in its usual full sun location as the upper leaves (bracts) turn red, pink or white. During November and December, fertilize every three weeks and water regularly. Next Christmas enjoy your beautiful "new" poinsettia.

For information about extending other holiday plants, visit

<https://www.uky.edu/hort/sites/www.uky.edu.hort/files/documents/christmasflowers.pdf>.

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