

Holiday Plants-Choosing and Keeping them all year
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It has been a great year in the garden, but now things are winding down and our thoughts turn to the coming holidays and the joys of holiday plants. Thanks to the diligent efforts of plant hybridizers, many beautiful and colorful plants crowd shelves in florist shops, plant nurseries, even grocery stores.

Virginia Master Gardeners have some suggestions to assure a long season of bloom for your holiday plant. When selecting a plant, first, check out the leaves, particularly the undersides, for any sign of insects or disease. Always select a plant that is free of insects and disease and one that looks sturdy, clean and shapely. Avoid plants that have yellow leaves, brown leaf margins, wilted foliage or spindly growth. Choose one that has fresh green foliage, new flower and leaf buds and young growth.

Now that you have selected your beautiful, healthy plant at the store, getting it home is the next step. Ideally, you will not have to expose it to extreme cold while getting it from the store to your car and then into your home. Wrap the plant in paper and put a couple of plastic bags around the pot and foliage. Carry it home in the front of the car, as the trunk is usually too cold.

Finding the right spot for the plant when you get it home depends to a degree on the plant. But all of them need a well lighted spot, away from drafts and direct sunlight. Like people and pets, they also need more humidity than we naturally have indoors in the winter. Massing your plants in one area will help keep humid air around the plants. Hot, dry air will cause many plants to wilt so it is important to water when needed, rather than on a strict schedule.



Encore bloomers appearing again: Red Lion Amaryllis, Poinsettia grown from cutting and Ludisia orchid spikes. Keeping the plants together helps with humidity. Note the Amaryllis bulb will need a slightly larger pot for the summer.

Let's look at some of the popular holiday bloomers and how you can have them blooming again next year.

Amaryllis

The Amaryllis is a popular gift plant because it can be forced to produce stunning flowers during the holiday season. Amaryllis blooms are in colors ranging from white through pink, red, orange and yellow; some are double and some are striped or marked with a contrasting color.

If you want to save the bulb for next year, when the flowers fade, cut off the bloom stalk, water with a balanced liquid fertilizer to encourage growth of new leaves, and water regularly to keep it growing. Then put it outside when the weather warms up in spring. Bulbs can be left in their original containers for two or more years before repotting. If you have one of the waxed Amaryllis bulbs, it does not need to be potted in order to bloom. But if you want to try growing it on, after the blooms have faded, pot it up and treat it like any other Amaryllis.

Bear in mind that the larger the bulb, the larger the flowers, so it is important to keep the leaves green and growing until fall, when you should bring the pot inside and rest the bulb in a dark place for a month or so. Just put the pot on its side and ignore it until November or December. Then, if the bulb is crowding the edges of the pot, repot the bulb in a slightly larger container; water it thoroughly; set the pot in a light spot until new growth appears. Then bring it into a brighter lighted area, water it when it gets dry on top and feed it every two weeks with a dilute liquid fertilizer. The flower stalk may be smaller than the first time, but beautiful nonetheless.

Poinsettia

Very few plants are as closely associated with a holiday as poinsettias are with Christmas. The showy portions of the poinsettia, which most people think of as the flower, are actually colorful leaves called bracts. In addition to the traditional red, bracts can be pink, white, orange, and even purple and they can be marbled or swirled with a different color. Poinsettia plants come in many sizes and their bracts come in a wide range of shapes. Intensive breeding programs have produced new varieties that retain their foliage and bracts, sometimes until spring with proper care.

Keep your poinsettias away from drafts and chilly air. Poinsettias grow best in well-lit areas, but direct sun or hot lights can dry out the plants. Water your poinsettia when the surface of the soil is dry to the touch. Slightly humid air will help prolong the plants' color and life span; consider misting the plants with a sprayer or placing them on gravel trays.

The best way to keep your poinsettia for next year is to take cuttings, root them and grow them outside during the summer. Or, grow them in the house if you have space. While it is possible to keep the original plant growing and have it bloom again next season, this process requires a lot of time and attention, and is not usually successful. It is better to take cuttings and discard the plant.



The unique bract shape of 'J'Adore Dark Pink' along with its pink color mark this plant as a new introduction. Generally, these plants are patented (and marked as such) so it is illegal to propagate them by cuttings. However, you can still try to keep the plant going after the bracts fade. Photo courtesy of Greenhouse Product News.

Christmas cactus

Thanks to its name, fantastic, colorful blooms, and low-maintenance reputation, Christmas cactus has been popular for decades. In addition to the original bright red flowers in winter, this plant can now be found in varieties that bloom in time for almost any holiday and in colors such as pink, orange and yellow. While it is in bloom, keep it in bright, indirect light and away from drafts. Be sure to water it when the top of the soil is dry to the touch. Despite the "cactus" in its name, it is a native of tropical rain forests and will drop its flower buds if allowed to get too dry. In a bright spot, with proper watering, the blooms should last for a couple of weeks.



This "Christmas" cactus pumps out its flowers at Thanksgiving after spending the summer on a shaded porch. It will soon need to be repotted.

It is well worth keeping your Christmas Cactus for next year. After the flowers have fallen, move the plant into a cool sunny area and water when the soil is dry on top. Feed it a liquid fertilizer each month from April to September. When all danger of frost is past in spring, put the plant outside in a bright spot. This plant will tolerate a little direct sun. It likes to be pot bound, so you will not need to re-pot it this year. The Christmas cactus starts developing its flower buds when days become shorter and the nights become cooler, usually in September or October. When you see flower buds forming (and definitely before the first frost), bring the plant inside and place it in a brightly lighted place to finish growing its flower buds. Put it where you can leave it while blooming because it does not like to be moved once its flower buds are mature.

Orchid

The orchids seen everywhere these days most often are the Phalanopsis, or moth orchid. Although they have been forced into bloom for the holiday season, they generally bloom naturally in late fall and early winter. These orchids are sturdy and lasting. A plant under good conditions can hold its flowers beautifully for a couple of months or longer.

These orchids require good light, high levels of humidity and attention to watering. Set your orchid pot on a bed of pebbles or gravel in a shallow container. Fill the container with water to the top of the gravel but do not let the water touch the pot. Your orchid is planted in moss or bark chips. These materials drain quickly, so water when the top of the planting medium is dry to the touch.



Phalaenopsis "Brother Wild Thing" responded to a couple of weeks of cooler nights by putting up this bloom stalk.

If you want your orchid to bloom again next year, remove the bloom stalk after the blossoms drop, move the plant into a well lighted area, such as an east, west or curtained south facing window. Orchids do not like direct sun on their leaves. Water the plant regularly during the spring and summer growing period, feeding it a half strength, liquid orchid fertilizer every two weeks until September. Then cut back on the feeding and watering to let the plant rest for a month or so. A bloom stalk will usually make its appearance during this period and then you should resume the watering and feeding schedule.

We wish you an enjoyable and productive fall and winter gardening season. And, meanwhile, fellow gardeners, keep on growing.

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