

Care of Holiday Plants

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



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PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson

The poinsettia is the most popular and decorative plant for the Christmas season. The brightly colored "petals" are actually modified leaves called bracts.

We use a variety of decorative plants to dress up our homes during the holidays. Poinsettias, holiday cactuses and living Christmas trees, in particular, play an important part in decking the halls. How well you care for them once you get them home has a lot to do with how long they stay attractive.

After purchasing a holiday plant, be sure to protect it

while bringing it home. Sudden exposure to low temperatures and wind will damage the plant. Also, make sure your plant doesn't get crushed or tipped over on the way home. Poinsettias are particularly fragile, so handle them with care. It's best to have them sleeved before you take them out of the store.

Holiday plants are often

sold wrapped in colorful foil or placed in a pot cover. When you get your plant home, punch holes in the foil under the drainage holes in the pot. This allows water to drain properly and prevents the roots from becoming waterlogged. Make sure the furniture or floor where you set your plant is protected by a plastic saucer or something similar. If the





pot has a decorative pot cover, lift the pot out of the cover and water the plant at the sink. You can put it back in the cover after it drains.

Light and water are two key considerations in caring for your plants when you get them home. The plants should, of course, be located for attractive display, but a place where they will receive some natural light will give best results. If you are interested in continuing to grow a decorative plant after the Christmas season, it is especially important to move it to a place where it will receive ample light as soon as you are finished displaying it.

Your plant's water needs should be checked every day by feeling the soil with your finger. Water thoroughly whenever the soil begins to feel somewhat dry. This may be easier if you take the plant to a sink, water it, let it drain and then place it back on display.

Allowing a plant to dry out, low light, low humidity, drafts and placing it near sources of heat can all shorten the attractive life of your holiday plant. With a little care and attention, you can make sure that your plant will provide a beautiful display throughout the season.

Poinsettia: The poinsettia is the most popular and decorative plant for the Christmas season. The brightly colored red, pink, salmon or creamy white "petals" are actually modified leaves called bracts. The true flowers are small and clustered in the center of the bracts.

When selecting your poinsettia, make sure the true flowers haven't all fallen off so your plants will remain attractive longer.

Poinsettias have long been considered poisonous, but extensive research has shown that they are not. Still, prevent children and pets from chewing on them because they could choke on pieces of the leaves.

Today's poinsettias should hold their leaves and bracts well through the season given proper care. After the holidays, most people simply discard the plants, much as you would a bouquet of flowers. (You can chop them up and put them in your compost pile.) This is fine because the plant is unlikely to ever look as good as it did when it was first purchased.

Christmas cactus: Thanksgiving and Christmas cactuses have been hybridized with each other to the point that we now have cactuses that bloom anytime from November through January.

It is common for them to drop flower buds when you get them home. These plants resent being moved at all while blooming, much less being packaged, shipped, unwrapped, displayed, purchased and taken home. But many blooms and buds will hold on, and their great beauty in shades of magenta, red, pink, orange, gold or white makes their purchase worth it.

When they finish blooming, these plants should not be discarded.

The holiday cactus will reward you with blooms every year for many years if treated correctly. After all the flowers have dropped off, allow the soil to become somewhat dry between watering, and keep the plant in a well-lit window. An east or west window will provide plenty of light. They also will thrive on a porch or patio in semi-shade during summer.

Living Christmas tree: Various conifers are sold decorated as living Christmas trees. It is common to see Norfolk Island pines for sale during the holiday season. Make sure you keep them watered while they are on display. After Christmas, remove the decorations and place the tree in good growing conditions (exposure to ample light and watered when soil becomes dry to the touch).

Some homeowners transplant Norfolk Island pines in their landscapes. I've seen several home landscapes on Galveston Island where Norfolk Island pines are the dominant landscape tree. Norfolk Island pines grow well along coastal landscapes. However, I do not recommend growing this tree on the mainland as it's likely to sustain freeze damage if extended periods of freezing weather occur.

