



Caring For Your Holiday Plants

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Now is the time of year when we begin to see holiday plants and bulbs for sale all over the place – poinsettias, amaryllis, Christmas cacti, and others. Maybe you want to grow an Amaryllis bulb for bloom at Christmas, or perhaps you have a Christmas cactus that never blooms. Or do all of the leaves fall off of your poinsettia prematurely? Here are a few hints for caring for these plants.

If you want an *amaryllis bulb* to bloom for the holidays, it is fun to start it yourself. Bulbs can range in price from a few dollars to \$20 or more each. The price difference is a reflection of the size of the bulb, and consequently the plant, and the newness and beauty of the hybrid. I would make my decision on how much to pay for a bulb based upon whether I was going to try to keep the bulb and bring it to bloom for many years. If all you want is a plant to last one season, then the inexpensive bulbs are fine and beautiful.

Amaryllis typically take 6 to 8 weeks from the time you plant them until they are in full bloom. The flowers last about 2 weeks. Therefore, you should plant your bulbs in early to mid November for Christmas bloom. It is fun to have several bulbs and start them at one-week intervals to assure a prolonged bloom period.

Amaryllis grow from huge bulbs that can be as big as a grapefruit. They grow best in tight quarters. The pot should be only one to two inches wider than the bulb and should have a drainage hole in the bottom. Fill the pot about half full; put the bulb in and fill with additional soil. Pack the soil firmly, as Amaryllis can be top heavy. The top one-third of the bulb should be exposed. Water the bulb well after planting, but do not allow the soil to remain soggy. Place the pot in a bright window and water only when the soil feels dry. Once the flower stalk begins to develop, keep turning the pot so that the flower stalk will not lean to one side.

If you want to keep your Amaryllis from year to year you should cut off the flower stalk when it has finished blooming. Keep the plant in a sunny window and keep watering it. Feed it with a water-soluble houseplant food once a month. You may move the plant outdoors for the summer but do not plant it in the ground. In August or September the leaves will start to turn yellow. Slow down watering and stop feeding. When the leaves die completely, cut them off and stop watering completely. Move the container to a cool dark place. When you want the bulb to grow and bloom again move it to a bright window and start watering and fertilizing. Do not repot Amaryllis frequently. Leave them in the same pot for three to four years.

Care of a *poinsettia* is simple, but there are a few tricks for keeping it attractive. First, be careful when you purchase the plant and bring it home. Try to buy your plant when it has just arrived at the store especially if it is in a paper or plastic plant sleeve. Remove the sleeve immediately when you get the plant home. If a plant sleeve stays in place more than 24 hours, the ethylene gas produced by the plant will cause the leaves to begin falling off. When you are bringing a poinsettia home, protect it from cold and drafts --these also cause the plant to drop its leaves.

At home, put your plant in indirect or filtered light. Do not place it in a bright southern or western exposure, on a hot television, near a heat vent or a draft from a door, or in a place where there is no natural light. All of these can cause leaf drop or the premature demise of your plant. Allow the soil of a poinsettia to get semi-dry between waterings. Make sure you drain off all excess water when you do water it. With the proper care, your poinsettia will last for months.

Another common holiday plant is the *holiday or Christmas cactus (Schlumbergera)*. There are many related cacti, and they bloom anywhere from October until Easter. Some bloom twice. They all look very similar and their culture is the same. The first rule with a Christmas cactus comes into play when you buy it. Do not allow it to be in a draft or sit in a cold car too long on the way home. All of the flowers and flower buds will drop off and you will have no flowers that year.

Once you have purchased a Christmas cactus, it is easy to grow for many years. Indoors, Christmas cacti should be grown in direct sunlight. You can place them outside for the summer, but when outdoors protect them from direct sun, which can burn the stems. Average house temperatures and humidity are fine, but avoid drafts and rapid changes in temperature, especially when buds are on the plant.

Christmas cacti should be watered when the soil feels dry to the touch. Drain excess water from the plant; too much water will make Christmas cacti rot. They should be fed with an all-purpose, water-soluble houseplant fertilizer every two to three weeks, from right after flowering until the setting of new flower buds.

The trick in growing Christmas cacti is in getting them to rebloom. Both temperature and length of day will affect flowering. Flower buds will form regardless of length of day if the night temperature is maintained at 50 to 55 degrees. Thirteen hours of uninterrupted darkness per night are needed if the temperature is between 55 and 70 degrees and 15 hours are needed if the temperature is above 70 degrees. One of the above conditions must exist for 9 weeks starting in early to mid September. This all sounds very complicated, but you can create the right conditions simply by placing the plant in a corner of a room that has a window but does not receive artificial light. You may also create the right conditions by covering the plant with dark cloth, or putting it in a closet at night. Do not give the plant 24 hours of darkness.

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