



# Christmas Tree & Poinsettia Care

Christmas decorations would be incomplete without a tree and poinsettias - they have become symbols of the season to many people. Good artificial copies of these two plants are available, but to most people these "fakes" are just not the same. Real trees symbolize hope in the often dismal gloom of winter. Their scent fills our homes enriching our experience of the holiday season through another one of our senses. Live poinsettias seem to have a presence that artificial copies can not achieve. Both of these seasonal plants enhance our memories of Christmas. Here are some tips to help you care for and safely enjoy these two plants.

## Christmas Trees

Start by selecting the best, freshest tree possible. Trees with a root ball that are intended for planting after the holidays should be only be kept indoors for about a week. Longer periods can dry them out and force them to break dormancy which will weaken them when they are finally moved outside for planting. When setting them indoors put the root ball in a plastic garbage bag and mist the roots with a water filled spray bottle daily to keep moist.

Cutting your own tree is a great way to be assured of freshness. There is a list of Maryland Christmas tree growers that is available free at the Extension Office. Most of us will be choosing from trees already cut. Buy your tree early. This will allow you to begin to care for it closer to when it was cut. Look for a tree with good color and check its freshness by shaking it vigorously

or lightly pulling on the needles to see if they drop off. Then check the branches, fresh trees have springy branches.

The tree should be stored in a cool place protected from wind until you are ready to set it up inside. Cut the trunk about an inch above the base at a right angle. Place the tree in a bucket of water and check it often to keep the water level above the cut.

When setting the tree up inside use a stand that has a water reservoir and will support the tree securely. Locate the tree away from heat sources like radiators, fireplaces, and tv sets. Water the tree daily, never allow the reservoir to dry out. When brought inside expect the tree to initially use a large amount of water. Tree decorations should be of the non-flammable type. Lights should be inspected each year before placing them on the tree. When purchasing lights select products bearing the Underwriters Laboratories, Inc. label. Do not leave the tree lights on over night or when adults are not present. *Take the tree down when the needles begin to fall off.* Evergreen trees are filled with pitch and resin. These substances are extremely combustible when dry. If they ignite they burn with such intensity that it is almost impossible to extinguish. Do not keep dry trees in the house.

## Poinsettias

These plants do best with room temperatures between 65 - 75 degrees. Be sure to keep them away from drafts. Poinsettias require bright natural indirect light when kept

indoors. They will develop yellow leaves and drop flowers if placed in direct sunlight. Keep the soil in the pot moist, do not let it dry out or get soggy. Poinsettia leaves are poisonous, keep them away from small children and pets.

Poinsettias can be saved for a second season. Start by cutting plants back in early May to 3 - 4 inches and repot them. When frost danger is past, place the pots outside in full sun. Water to keep the soil moist. Fertilize monthly when new growth begins using 20-20-20 water soluble fertilizer. Pinch plants back to control height when they reach 4 - 5 inches of new growth, and continue with each additional 2 - 3 inches of growth. Stop pinching back plants by early September. Bring them inside when outdoor temperatures go below 60 degrees and place them in a location that provides good indirect natural light.

Poinsettias initiate flowering as the days get shorter. The flowers develop from the upper leaves called "Bracts". Starting in October and through Thanksgiving provide the plants with 10 hours of light and 14 hours of darkness each day. This simulated night must be totally dark with not even a glimmer of light showing through or flowering may not occur. Once flowering starts the plants are not as light sensitive. Depending on the hybrid variety, expect flowering to last 6 - 8 weeks. My favorite hybrid is 'Jingle bells' - the color is just gorgeous, it may be difficult to find but well worth the trouble.

*For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, 301- 600-1596, or visit <http://www.frederick.umd.edu/>. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.*