



Christmas Plant Care: Poinsettias, Christmas Cacti and Live Christmas Trees



POINSETTIA-

One of the most recognizable decorations at Christmas is the poinsettia. Even though poinsettias were almost unknown just 70 years ago, today they are the most popular flowering potted plant in the United States. Also known by its beautiful Spanish name of flor de nochebuena, or "flower of Christmas Eve," the poinsettia is indigenous to Central America and tropical Mexico. The story goes that a poor Mexican child on her way to church on Christmas Eve wept because she had no gift to place before the altar of the Virgin and Child. Through her tears, an angel suddenly appeared and instructed her to gather weeds from the roadside. When the child arrived at the altar with her wilted offering, starry crimson "blossoms" burst forth from every stem.

Joel Roberts Poinsett was the first United States Ambassador to Mexico being appointed by President Andrew Jackson in the 1820's. He took cuttings from the plant and brought them back to his greenhouse in South Carolina. While Poinsett had an outstanding career as a

United States Congressman and Mexican Ambassador, he is best remembered for introducing the poinsettia into the United States.

The usual color choice is the deep, vibrant red. However, there is a wide array of other colors, including pink, white, marbled, and speckled. The colorful parts of the poinsettia, the bracts, are actually modified leaves.

The plant you choose at the store should have flowers that are just beginning to open, or better still, the plant should have fully colored bracts with the flower buds still very tightly closed. You can expect the appearance of the plant to decline somewhat after the flowers have fully opened and have fallen off.

The plant should appear full with uniformly dark green leaves from under the colored bracts to almost the base of the plant. The leaves themselves should be completely free of disease and insects. The plant should be strong enough to stand on its own. No ties or stakes should be needed. Before you leave the store, ask for a protective sleeve to protect the plant from wind, rain, or cold temperature as you transport it. Don't buy a plant that has been stored in a sleeve or that looks wilted when the soil appears wet. This is a condition called epinasty from which the plant will not recover. A blast of cold air of less than 50 degrees F will give a severe shock to your plant and may result in leaf drop.

Poinsettias thrive in bright, but not direct, sunlight. Put the plant near a sunny window but not in direct sunlight. Direct sunlight could discolor the bracts. On the other hand, low light can cause the plant to lose some of its leaves. Consider displaying it in a shady location like the dining room table, but maintaining it near a window.

Poinsettias will not tolerate moisture extremes. Do not keep the potting mix too wet or too dry. If allowed to dry out too much, the plant will wilt and drop its leaves. Conversely, don't allow the plant to remain in standing water. This could result in root rot, which will cause the plant to decline.

Fertilizer should not be a concern until after Christmas. Then you can use a soluble fertilizer at a rate of about

1/4 teaspoon per gallon of water. This should be done once a month until April.

Poinsettias do not last long when exposed to extremes in temperature, particularly in drafty locations. This can cause overall plant decline and leaf drop. Keep the plant away from heat vents and outside doors or windows. Try to maintain the temperature at no higher than 70 degrees F. If possible, keep the plant with other plants or set the container in a gravel filled pan half-filled with water. Doing this will keep the humidity a little higher around the plant in an otherwise dry, winter home.

The poinsettia is a perennial plant, so it can live for many years. However, the average span of time in which a poinsettia is most attractive in the home is two to four weeks. With excellent care, it could last from six to eight weeks. The maturity of the plant when it was purchased also plays a role in longevity of your poinsettia.

If you want to maintain your poinsettia beyond the Christmas season, you will need to give it some attention on a regular basis. In early April, cut the plant back to about six or eight inches in height and place it outside in the shade. Keep the plant watered. Fertilize the poinsettia regularly when new growth begins. You can re-pot your poinsettia to a larger sized container in May. Use a potting mix similar in composition to the one in which the plant is currently growing. Pinch growing tips every four to six weeks during the summer to make the plant bushy. But do not prune any more after September 1. Bring the plant indoors before the threat of cool weather.

Some people enjoy the challenge of re-flowering the plants they have kept from Christmas past. If you have decided to accept this challenge, you must decrease the day length (photoperiod) in the autumn to stimulate flowering. To make sure that your poinsettia will be in flower by December, the day length for the plant should not exceed 10 hours. For about 8 to 10 weeks beginning on October 1, place your poinsettia in complete darkness every day from about 5 p.m. to 7 or 8 a.m. The plant must not be exposed to even a single burst of light during this dark, long-night period. During the light period each day, place the plant where it will receive bright, indirect sunlight. Even when re-flowering is successfully achieved, the plant is often of inferior quality to those purchased each year.

The poinsettia is the most widely tested consumer plant on the market today, proving the toxicity myth about the popular holiday plant to be false. As with any non-food product, the poinsettia is not meant to be eaten and can cause varying degrees of discomfort; therefore, the plant should be kept out of the reach of young children and curious pets.



Christmas Cactus

It's not unusual for a single Christmas Cactus plant to be passed down from generation to generation because they're long-lived, rather easy plants to grow. But if you want to get them in bloom for the upcoming holiday season, they will need a little special care during the coming weeks.

These plants are members of the Zygo-cactus family. Most of which are native to Central and South America. Although these plants are called cacti, they are truly different in all aspects from the common desert cactus with which we are all familiar. Since they are tropical cacti, their cultural requirements are totally different from true cacti. So here are a few ideas on how to care for them and the steps to follow to get them into bloom for the upcoming holiday season.

Since the Christmas cactus is a tropical plant it will require watering on much the same basis as any other type of tropical plant. A good procedure to follow is to water the plants thoroughly and then allow about

the top inch of soil to dry before watering again.

Christmas cactus require about 50 to 60 percent humidity. So it's a good practice to place a glass, vase or tray of water near the plant. As the water evaporates it will provide the humidity the cactus needs. A humidity tray is another method of providing the humidity the Christmas cactus requires. This is done by filling a water-proof saucer with gravel, then adding water halfway up the gravel. Place the pot on the gravel surface.

The Christmas cactus should never be placed near a door that opens and closes to the outside. Likewise, keep it away from heating ducts or near the fireplace or drafty areas.

One of the most frustrating things that can happen to Christmas cactus is after the flower buds have devel-

oped they drop off the plant. Bud drop can be caused by anyone of several different conditions. Usually it's because of overwatering, lack of humidity or insufficient light.

After The Christmas holiday season, the Christmas cactus should be given about a 30 day rest. Again place it in a cool room and provide limited water. Don't worry if it loses a few leaves or joints and appears weak during this rest period.

This is not the time to pinch, prune or shape a Christmas cactus. The best time is when the new growth begins in March or early April.

Likewise, the best time for repotting a cactus is in February, March or April. However, keep in mind the plant will flower best if it's kept in a container where it's pot bound. If your Christmas cactus is given proper care and is placed in the right location, it's not unusual for it to flower several times throughout the year.



Live Christmas Tree

For those who really want a fresh and natural tree for Christmas, using a living tree which can then be planted after the holiday is the way to go.

Some people might use living trees because they're conservation minded. Others might want one for sentimental reasons. But whatever the reason living trees do present an alternative to cut trees or artificial ones. Just keep in mind that living trees require special care different than cut trees.

The Virginia pine (*Pinus virginia*) is the major Christmas tree species for East Central Texas. A grower can produce a 6- to 8-foot Virginia pine Christmas tree in 3 to 5 years, depending on soil and climatic conditions. Home owners are reminded that in a few years the Christmas tree can be a major feature in a landscape.

The Afghan pine (*Pinus eldarica*) is the major Christmas tree species for the alkaline soils found in South Central and West Texas. Growth rate of this pine variety is very similar to Virginia pine.

Other tree species planted in limited amounts are eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginia*), deodar cedar (*Cedrus deodara*), Arizona cypress (*Cypressus arizonica*), sand pine (*Pinus clausa*) and spruce pine (*Pinus glabra*). These are usually restricted to choose-and-cut operations which provide variety for the customer. Know the size tree you need before buying it just like you would with a cut tree. A live tree should be kept indoors no longer than two weeks. Because it's alive it doesn't adapt well to indoor conditions.

Either a balled and bur lapped or potted tree can be used, but the root ball must be handled with care. Be careful not to drop it nor carry the tree by its trunk because that could damage the root ball or the trunk.

Before bringing the tree inside it needs to be conditioned to being in a heated house. Place it in a large pan or other container where it can be watered but won't ruin your floors. Allow it to remain upright in an unheated building such as a garage, shed or barn for a few days to adjust to being kept indoors. Water it with at least two quarts of water daily. When watering pour the water slowly on top of the root ball and allow the water to be absorbed. Don't just leave the root ball sitting in water as would be done with a cut tree.

The room where the tree will be displayed inside your house needs to be kept cool at all times. Close heat vents and keep it away from fireplaces or other heat sources. Warm temperatures might cause the tree to break dormancy and begin to break bud which is undesirable at this time of year.

After Christmas, place the tree standing upright in an unheated structure, such as a garage, shed or barn for a few days to condition it to transition back outdoors. After reconditioning, the tree can be planted outside in

the same manner as you would ordinarily plant a tree in the landscape. If you can't plant it right away stand the tree upright and keep it sheltered from direct sunlight and wind. Water the root ball regularly and cover it with mulch to keep it from drying out.

Fresh-cut Christmas Tree Care

The Texas Christmas Tree Growers make these recommendations for caring for a fresh cut tree:

When you bring the tree home, make a fresh cut one-quarter inch or more above the original cut until you reach fresh wood. This removes the sap seal, allowing your tree to absorb water.

Immediately place the tree in a water-holding tree stand. Trees are very thirsty, so make sure to keep it watered. A Christmas tree may drink one gallon or more of fresh water per day for the first few days, then decrease their intake.

Check the water supply daily and replenish as needed.

If storing your Christmas tree outside before decorating, remember to keep it in water and protect it from wind and sun.

In the house, place the tree away from fireplaces and other heat sources.

Carefully check all electric light and connections before decorating the tree and home. Do not use lights with worn or frayed cords and NEVER use lighted candles.

Be sure to turn off all decorations before retiring at night and at any time you leave your home.

At the end of the holiday season, be sure to recycle your Christmas tree. Go to www.earth911.com or check with your city or county to see what options they have for recycling your tree.

Selecting Cut Greens and Wreaths

The same advice for choosing fresh trees applies to wreaths and greens, Specifically:

- Buy only those that exhibit good needle retention. Cut evergreen material used indoors will last longer if used in cooler locations.
- Roping will last for many weeks if kept outside in the cold, often damp weather. When used indoors, it can dry out rapidly. Be careful of flammability: roping used near fireplaces dries rapidly and can pose safety problems.
- Wreaths used indoors will also dry rapidly. It's best to keep in a cooler location indoors if at all possible.
- The use of an anti-desiccant can be used to reduce drying. Read the label before applying and follow all directions.
- Cut holly can last for many weeks. Changing the water periodically, cleaning the container and making fresh cuts on the end of branches will keep holly fresher longer.