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SUMMARY

Poinsettias are fussy and difficult to cultivate, and are best purchased each year. However, other holiday plants are long-lived, easily grown, and can become permanent members of your home garden. As with any plantings, some advance planning is important to integrate holiday plants into an outdoor garden. Consider ultimate size and appropriate growing conditions when selecting holiday plants that you intend to keep.

Editor's note: be careful if you have pets. Some plants can be quite toxic. See <https://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/animal-poison-control/toxic-and-non-toxic-plants>

Caring for Holiday Plants

by Earlene Millier, UC Master Gardener

With proper care, holiday plants can outlast the holidays.

Q: I like to decorate my home at the holidays with poinsettias and other holiday plants, but they don't last very long. Can I get my holiday plants to live through the holidays or even longer? Is it possible to get poinsettias to re-bloom?

A: Plants are popular gifts and decorations around the holidays. With proper care, they can last several weeks, and some can live for years. Here are some general guidelines for several popular holiday plants.

Poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*):

These colorful plants can last many weeks if cared for properly. The "blooms" are actually bracts, a type of leaf. Put them in bright indoor light, near a south, east, or west-facing window. Keep away from drafts, heating or air conditioning ducts. Keep the soil uniformly moist but not wet. Never let the plant sit in water.

It's difficult to rebloom a poinsettia and it's unlikely to look as good as when you brought it home, even if you do get it to rebloom. Poinsettias are quite picky,

and they need a precise regimen of the right light, moisture, humidity, temperature, food, and pruning in order to rebloom. They also need absolute darkness from 5 PM to 8 AM every night, from the first week of October until Thanksgiving. It's probably a better use of your time and effort to throw the plant on the compost heap when it no longer looks good and get a new one the following year. That way, you can enjoy the wide variety of colors developed in the past few years. If you must have rebloom, detailed instructions are at:

https://ucanr.org/sites/UrbanHort/files/8015_5.pdf

Christmas Cactus (*Schlumbergera x buckleyi*):

In terms of easy care, this plant is just about the polar opposite of the poinsettia. It's not fussy about its surroundings and re-blooms readily. The Christmas cactus is long lived and easily propagated from cuttings. Put it in bright but not direct light, let it dry out between waterings, and never let it sit in water. Christmas cactus can spend the warmer months outdoors in a



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sheltered location. Feed monthly with a diluted water soluble fertilizer during spring and summer. Withhold fertilizer when the plant is setting buds and resume feeding after flowering. If exposed to sudden temperature changes Christmas cactus sometimes drop their buds, so keep them away from frequently-opened doors and out of cold drafts. After blooming, prune the plant lightly to stimulate re-flowering. For more about growing these colorful succulents, please see:

<https://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/pdf/8114.pdf>

Living Christmas Trees:

These have become more popular as people become increasingly reluctant to cut fresh trees and deal with the disposal issues. Keep your living Christmas tree indoors for the shortest possible time—a week to ten days at the most—and then plant it properly.

Choosing the right tree is essential. A wide range of dwarf varieties are available: yews, junipers, arborvitae, holly, and many conifers. Non-traditional choices abound, too.

Consider small palms, potted citrus, laurels, olive trees, and other varieties that are useful, attractive, and could even be used in successive years if kept in a container. Even rosemary plants, which can be pruned into tree shapes, have become popular and transplant

easily to outdoor locations. Consider the mature size and growth habit of whatever plant you get, and choose a variety that grows well in your area. Don’t pick the largest plant available; select one that is smaller in proportion to its rootball or container.

Store the tree in a cool area where it will be protected from wind, freezing, and direct sunlight. Make sure the rootball doesn’t dry out. You can spray the tree with an anti-transpirant to help protect it from drying out, but even if you do this, check the soil frequently, water as needed, and don’t let it sit in water. Bring it indoors as late as possible and place it away from radiators, heater vents, and fireplaces. A cool room is best. Decorate it with lights that don’t give off heat.

After the holiday, move the plant back outdoors to its sheltered location and let it get used to outdoor temperatures again before planting. Plant the tree as soon as weather allows. You can find information on planting trees at:

<https://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/pdf/8046.pdf>

Until the tree’s root system has grown into the surrounding soil, it will need frequent but light irrigation. After establishment, the watering schedule can be adjusted to deeper but less frequent watering at the tree’s dripline.