

Holiday Plant Care

By John Porter, Agriculture & Natural Resources Extension Agent

To many, thoughts of the holidays bring to mind certain traditional plants associated with the holidays. These plants typically evoke a sense of tradition and harken back to holidays long ago. Some, such as the poinsettia, are common and form the core of traditional holiday decorating. Others, such as the Christmas cactus, amaryllis and paperwhites, are much less common but offer great holiday decorating and gifting ideas.

Poinsettias

Contrary to popular belief, poinsettias are not toxic to either humans or pets. This myth has been in circulation for a while now, and a great deal of research and case studies are available that debunk the claims. Ingesting parts of poinsettias may cause mild stomach upset in both humans and pets, but do not have any fatal effect. The sap of the plant may cause a mild rash in the small percentage of people allergic to it, but otherwise causes no problems.

Poinsettias are a relatively easy to care for plant. They should be watered when the top layer of soil in the pot begins to dry and never be allowed to sit in water. Poinsettias should also be placed near a sunny window, but away from drafts or doors. The optimal temperature for poinsettias is 65-70°F. A temperature any lower than 60°F may cause leaves to drop. You should take great care in bringing your poinsettia home, because even just a short exposure to cold temperatures can cause trouble. Poinsettias may be kept to rebloom in following years, but a multi-step, year-long schedule is needed to ensure blooming at Christmas.

Amaryllis

The Amaryllis is a stately addition to any holiday décor. The plant comes from a large bulb, which should be planted about 6 weeks before the desired bloom time. Amaryllis prefer to be pot bound, so a container about one inch larger than the bulb on all sides should be selected. When planting, place the bulb on the soil, which should be rich in organic matter, and mound the soil up so that the top half to third of the bulb is above the soil. The plant should be watered after the soil begins to dry. The blooming process may be speeded up by keeping the plant in a warm room, but moving it to a cooler location 55-65°F after blooming begins will make the blossoms more long lived.

After the blooms fade, the flower stalk can be cut off, leaving the foliage in place. To get the Amaryllis to bloom again the following year, it should be treated to normal houseplant conditions until late summer. At that time, place it in a cool but sunny place (like a basement window) and discontinue watering. After the foliage dries, it should be removed. The bulb can then be replanted six weeks before the desired bloom time.

Christmas Cactus

Despite the name, the Christmas cactus has little in common with the cacti of the desert. These plants, native to Central and South America, actually grow more like orchids and should be treated as such. They should be planted in a loose and airy soil mix and be well watered. They should be watered when the top inch of soil in the pot becomes dry. To initiate blooming, plants should be moved to a cool (55°F) but sunny place around the end of October. Depending on the variety, the cactus may bloom anytime from Thanksgiving to Christmas. Some varieties can even bloom around Easter.

Paperwhites

Paperwhites are typically associated with Amaryllis and are grown in much the same manner. These plants are actually a type of Narcissus and resemble their relatives the Daffodils. Kits are available that have around 5 bulbs in them. The bulbs can be planted in soil with the tops above the soil level, or even grown in a dish with small stones. This should be done 6-8 weeks before the desired bloom time. After planting, the pot or dish should be placed in a cool area to allow the roots to develop, and then moved to a warmer area. Paperwhites may become tall and need staked to keep from falling over. Flowers are usually white or white with orange centers and have a strong musky smell.

The WVU Kanawha County Extension Service in conjunction with Capitol Market will be hosting Holiday Family Fun Day on Dec. 11 from 5-7 pm in the Capitol Market retail area. Activities include sampling healthy holiday menu alternatives, free children's science and crafts and holiday plant workshops (5:30 pm – Holiday Plant Care; 6:30 pm – Christmas Tree Care and Safety).

WVU Kanawha County Extension will be closed in observance of the holidays on the following days: December 24, 25, 28, 31 and January 1. The office may be closed or have limited staffing on other days as faculty and staff take extra time to celebrate with their families.