

Plants Brighten the Holidays, But Care Is Needed to Keep Them Healthy

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A special way to brighten the holidays is to fill the house with plants or to give them as gifts. There are dozens to choose from and not one is any less special than another.

Houseplants brighten spirits during the long, cold winter months. It can satisfy to itch to get outside to work in the yard and can be a challenging way to fight the winter blahs.

The most common plant during this time of year is the poinsettia. Nurseries and big box stores are filled with them. It is the signature houseplant during the holidays. Whether the plant has large bright red flowers, is sprinkled with glitter, or the flowers dyed a different color, the poinsettia holds a special place in many households.

While many consider it a plant to decorate the house only during the Christmas season, it is possible to prolong its life. Cut the stems back to four to six inches in March. When new growth appears place in a sunny window and continue to water once the surface soil is dry. Fertilize ever two weeks. In late May take it outdoors and once hardened, place the plant (pot and all) in soil in a location that gets 6 to 8 hours of sunlight. Bring back indoors in September.

Other common holiday seasonal favorite houseplants are Christmas cactus, rosemary, cyclamen, orchids, amaryllis, hyacinths, tulips and paperwhites. Other plants that deserve consideration when giving house plant gifts include kalanchoe plants, wintergreen, Christmas rose, peace lily, calla lily, gardenia, winter cherry, succulents, and miniature evergreen trees. While many of these plants are easy to find locally, for others it might require on-line shopping for the more unusual ones.

Most plants come with directions for their care. But it is easy to go by instinct which dictates the more water the plants receive the better. Unfortunately, that is the most common cause for houseplant failure. Overwatering is the number one reason plants die.

Too much water can lead to root rot and subsequent death. Generally, room temperature, humidity, the potting soil, and the amount of light a plant receives, dictates the frequency with which a plant should be watered. A plant growing in good light needs more moisture than one placed in a location with minimal light. Higher temperatures and lower humidity also increase the need for water.

Water plants when the top ½ inch of soil is dry. Let the water run through the holes in the pot to make sure the soil has been saturated, and most importantly, do not let the pot sit in a saucer full of water.

Browning on the tips of leaves is a sign of underwatering. But another reason for browning can be over-fertilizing a plant. In the winter months fertilizer should be used at half the amount recommended on the label. Fertilizer can build up in houseplants, block the lower light levels and reduce photosynthesis.

Clean dust and dirt off the leaves of the plants periodically, but do not use products that shine the leaves because these products increase the amount of dust and dirt on the plant. While cleaning the plants, keep an eye out for spider mites and mealy bugs – the bane of any plant's existence.