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Care of Christmas Plants

For a holiday held in winter, Christmas has traditionally been a time when we celebrate around a plant (Christmas tree) and give plants as gifts (poinsettia, etc…). Fortunately, many of these plants have value well after the celebration.

Poinsettias are one of the most traditional of Christmas plants. Fortunately, many can stay attractive for a long period with proper care. Doing so means placing them in a sunny window or the brightest area of the room (don't let them touch cold window panes and avoid drafty areas). Daytime temperatures should be 65 to 75 degrees F with nighttime temperatures in the 60 to 65 degrees F range. Higher temperatures will shorten bloom life. Lower ones

may cause root rot.

Poinsettias do not like 'wet feet', but allowing them to wilt tends to result in leaf drop. Maintain proper moisture by daily examining the potting soil. Stick your finger about one-half inch deep into the soil. If it is dry, add lukewarm water until some water runs out of the drainage hole, then discard the drainage water.

Note: poinsettias are not poisonous! Their milky sap may cause an allergic reaction, but there has never been a recorded case of poisoning.

A less common but still popular plant given this time of year is the Christmas Cactus, a plant native to the jungles of South America. A little more complicated to care for, Christmas Cactus tend to prefer bright indirect light (or leaves may turn yellow) and common household temperatures. Keep soil moist but not waterlogged. Lightly fertilize every other week.

Keep cactus moist and fertilized even after the cease of blooming in late winter. Make sure to repot in the spring if plants are too crowded or flowering may decrease. Move plants outside in a shady spot for the summer and leave them there until frost threatens.

When fall rolls back around, cease fertilizing and give plants only enough water so stems do not shrivel in order to encourage flower bud formation. Cactus take special conditions to initiate flower buds. Make sure that plants get night times greater than 12 hours long and between 59 and 69 degrees to help generate flowers. If you can't get twenty-five consecutive long nights to accomplish this, place plants in an unused room or cover them with a dark cloth or cardboard box to insure that they receive uninterrupted darkness. After the flower buds have formed, it takes an additional nine to 10 weeks for flowers to complete development and bloom.

Last but not least, don't forget the Christmas tree. While they can certainly be put out to be picked up and maybe even turned in to mulch, they have other potential uses as well. Birds like them for escape cover and weather protection when propped up in the corner of a deck with some birdseed nearby. Fish appreciate having them sunk in a pond where they can provide cover for minnows and other forms of small aquatic life that can attract larger fish.

If you want to get real creative, cut off the branches and use them as decorative mulch around landscape plants or cut them up and make them in to garden stakes.