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Holiday Blooming Plants

By JIM GAINAN

I've received several emails this last week from readers seeking care instructions for holiday blooming plants and bulbs. So, we dug through the archives and found the most complete list possible.

While the poinsettia is the plant most people associate with the holiday season, the Norfolk Island pine, Christmas cactus, amaryllis and paperwhites also make a perfect gift or festive accent for your own home.

Indoor Pine

Although the Norfolk Island pine is too tender to reside outdoors in Montana's climate, with a little TLC, it makes an attractive addition to any holiday décor. Soft green symmetrical branches sprout in horizontal layers from the main stem and will support very light ornaments or bows.

Ideally the Norfolk likes cool bright areas with temperatures ranging between 60-70°F and being slightly cooler at night. A spot by the fireplace, heat vent or cold drafty door would not make a very good home. It would prefer a couple of hours of direct morning sunlight, but will adapt to bright indirect light.

To maintain even growth, rotate the plant $\frac{1}{4}$ turn each week. Water the Norfolk thoroughly when the top inch or so of the soil feels dry.

Take care to saturate the entire root system and do not allow the plant to rest in standing water longer than 15 minutes. The Norfolk thrives in 50% relative humidity, which can be provided either by running a humidifier or placing the entire plant on a humidity tray made from a saucer, gravel and water.

Fertilize regularly with an all-purpose water soluble indoor plant food during the active growing season (March - November). During the dormant winter months, fertilizer is not needed.

Festive Cactus

The Christmas cactus is best known for its bright colorful tubular flowers. They are relatively easy care plants, once you understand their calendar. They will flower when nights become longer (about 15 hours of darkness) and they are exposed to cool temperatures (50- 55°F). If the night temperature is closer to 70°F, the buds will not set and the plant will not flower. Once in flower, the Christmas cactus needs bright indirect light. Daytime temperatures of 70°F and evening temperatures of 60-65°F are ideal. Too much light or heat may cause the flowers to fade more quickly and the buds to drop before blooming.

The Christmas cactus is not as drought-tolerant as its name implies and the leaves will wrinkle from lack of water. Allow the plant to dry slightly between waterings and water thoroughly each time. It is especially important not to let them go too dry while they are flowering.

After the flowers fade, fertilize the plant monthly as you would a green houseplant.

Plants may be pruned in June to encourage branching and flowering. The sections you remove may be rooted in moist vermiculite.

As you may have surmised, a common problem with the Christmas cactus is the dropping of unopened flower buds. Causes may be a sudden temperature or light change or lack of water. Lack of flowering may be caused by interrupted darkness hours.

Streetlights, car lights or indoor lighting may disrupt the require hours of dark.

Merry Amaryllis

Whether sold as a kit or as a plant already growing, the amaryllis and its showy blooms add a festive touch to any home. Plant bulbs in a potting medium leaving the neck exposed. Water sparingly until the stem appears, gradually increasing the water as the bud and leaves appear. Do not overwater, as this will encourage rot. The stem will grow rapidly with flowers developing after it reaches its full height.

After enjoying the prolific show, cut the old flowers off the stem and let the stalk die back naturally before cutting it away from the bulb completely. Continue to water and fertilize regularly as the leaves grow. They are feeding the bulb for next year's growth.

After the leaves die, cut them off, leaving two inches from the top of the bulb. Remove the bulb from the soil, and store it in a cool (40-50°F) dark place for a minimum of six weeks.

Check the calendar and plant the bulbs again about eight weeks from the time you want them to bloom. Plant the bulbs in a pot leaving about one inch of space between the bulb and the edge of the pot. Place in an area that receives bright indirect light and get ready for the show again.

Simple Paperwhites

With clusters of fragrant white flowers, let paperwhites add a touch of happiness to your home. Paperwhites are one of the easiest bulbs to force-bloom indoors. They do not need a chilling period and can be planted in soil, gravel or just in water. Watching them grow on a daily basis is fun for the entire family.

To force paperwhites, fill a shallow container with a couple of inches of potting soil or gravel. Plant the bulbs so the top half remains exposed and add water. Take care that the water is only up to the roots of the bulb and the whole bulb is not immersed as that will cause it to rot.

To prolong flowering, keep the paperwhites from any direct sunlight once they have started to bloom and keep them in a cool area (60- 65°F). Paperwhites will bloom four to eight weeks after planting. Once they have bloomed, you may discard the bulbs, as they will not bloom again.

For more information contact jim@gainans.com. Jim Gainan is a vice president of Gainan's Flowers and Garden Center in Billings, MT.