

Post Rock Answers

By Cassie Thiessen December 9, 2022

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Holiday Plants Brighten the Season

For a horticulturist like me, Christmas time means bright colorful poinsettias and other holiday plants to liven up the season. Many house plants are available this time of year including holiday cactus, Christmas pepper, kalanchoe, Jerusalem cherry, and cyclamen. Most of these plants can be enjoyed long past Christmas with the correct care. Here are some simple steps to care for the most common holiday plants.

The poinsettia was named after Joel Robert Poinsett, an amateur botanist and the first American ambassador to Mexico. He sent some poinsettia plants home to Greenville, South Carolina in 1825. Poinsettias are the number one potted flowering plant grown in the United States. The large colorful parts of the plant are not true flowers, they are modified leaves called 'bracts'. The true flowers are the small yellow/green buds in the center of the bracts. When choosing a poinsettia to bring home, look for tightly clustered yellow buds and crisp, bright, undamaged foliage.

To keep poinsettias looking beautiful, water when the plant's soil feels dry. Place them in a room with bright light but not next to a drafty window. You can try to keep your poinsettia year-round, but they are bred to be large and colorful, not long lasting. It might be a fun experiment to keep the plant till next Christmas but it is also easy to pick up a new one each season. Contrary to popular belief, poinsettias are not toxic. They can cause stomach irritation but unless you eat around 600 leaves you won't get sick.

There are two types of holiday cactus, Christmas cactus and Thanksgiving cactus. The main difference between the two is the shape of the stem segments. On the Thanksgiving cactus,

the edges of the segments are toothed or pointed; on the Christmas cactus, the segments are smaller and have rounded lobes. The Thanksgiving cactus tends to grow more upright, while the Christmas cactus tends to be more drooping. These cacti are called epiphytes because they grow on other plants in nature such as tree branches or decaying matter on the ground.

To get your holiday cactus to re-bloom, you must manipulate the light conditions. They bloom in response to short days and cool temperatures. In the greenhouse or in the home, expose them to nine hours of light and fifteen hours of darkness starting in September. These conditions will cause the plant to set flower buds. Unlike poinsettias these plants are very long lived and are often passed down from generation to generation. They are also easy to propagate by cutting two to three stem segments, letting them dry a few days, then putting them in a rooting mix.

Add some bright color to your holidays by purchasing or gifting a holiday plant. They are easy to care for and may last from season to season. K-State Research and Extension has a variety of resources for all your gardening and plant needs. Stop by or give us a call with your questions.

Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Cassie may be contacted at cathiessen@ksu.edu or by calling Beloit (785-738-3597).