

Proper Handling Keeps Holiday Gift Plants Going

CREAMERY (Montgomery Co.) — Potted plants received as gifts during the holiday season will continue to provide color and enjoyment if they are handled properly. One of the first steps in caring for gift plants is to realize that the winter home environment is hostile to a flowering plant. Plants are produced under optimum conditions with all the light, water, warmth and nutrients needed for quality flowers and foliage. The average home is to dark, dry and drafty in comparison to a greenhouse setting. In addition, we generally don't fertilize much at this time of the year.

The life of most flowering plants can be extended for days or even weeks beyond the holidays with some extra attention. Flowering plants require bright light to retain their flowers and foliage. Avoid direct exposure to the sun which heats the flowers and causes excessive moisture loss in an already dry atmosphere. Since the light helps the plant grow, turn the plant once a week to keep it symmetrical.

If you don't have access to east, south or western windows, set the plants close to artificial light. Fluorescent lamps are the best choice because incandescent light generates too much heat for the amount of light produced. It is possible for the heat of a light bulb to either burn or fade the flowers.

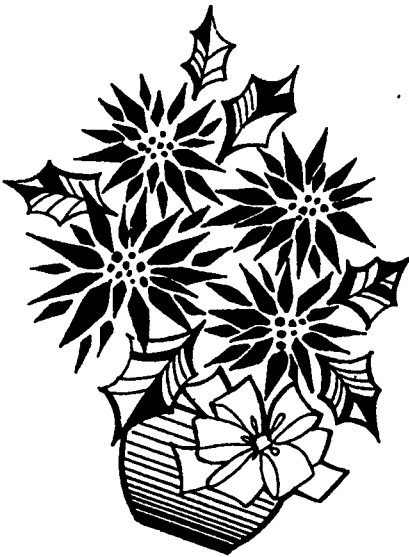
Many flowering plants are not produced at constant temperatures in the greenhouse. Most plants do well in bright spots with a temperature of 65° to 75° in the daytime and 50° to 55° at night. The cooler temperatures "slow" the plant down and help extend its decorative life. Remember that during winter the temperature of a room is considerably lower near a win-

dow than in the rest of the room. In a still room, temperatures near the glass may be low enough to damage the plant.

Drafts can be a serious hazard for plants in the winter. Cold air from open doors as well as the heat from radiators or air vents can chill or overheat the plant. Avoid any extremes in temperature.

In the excitement of the holidays you may forget to water your gift plant. Remember that indoor air is quite dry and the plant will dry out quickly. Also flowering plants tend to dry quicker than foliage plants. It is best to maintain a moderately moist root system all the time. Roots can be seriously damaged if they become too dry or are water-logged from too much water. Keep the soil surface moist with regular applications of tap water at room temperature. Cold water directly from the tap may be too cold for the roots. When you find it necessary to water the plant, add enough water to completely soak the root system. The excess water should pass through the drainage holes in the bottom of the container. If the plant is in a decorative pot with no drain hole, be very careful. Too much water will drive all the air from the roots.

If your plant has been allowed to dry out completely, dunk the pot in a deep pan of water to quickly replenish the soil's moisture. The dry soil mixture may cause the plant to float for a short time, but when the plant settles to the bottom of the pan the root ball will be wet. Remove the pot and allow the excess water to drain away. Blooming plants and those with large leaves will tend to dry out faster and require more frequent watering than nonflowering plants or those with smaller



leaves.

The removal of older, faded flowers will help prevent seed development from taking strength away from the rest of the plant. Periodic grooming of the plant will help keep it attractive for a longer time.

At some point in the future you will have to determine the fate of your holiday gift plant. These plants are produced under ideal conditions which cannot be duplicated in the home. In most instances it is probably better to discard the plant after it has finished flowering or is no longer attractive. However, some of the perennial woody plants can be grown in the home and garden for a number of years if they are given proper attention. Some may have to be taken indoors each fall to protect them from frost and cold weather.

Some plants need a dormant period after flowering while others can be kept growing until moving them outdoors in spring. Others tend to get spindly in the low light levels of late winter and will need to be pruned to keep them full and compact.

The poinsettia needs a dormant period between March and May when they are cut back to 3 to 5 inches before growth starts. Chrysanthemums can be maintained as a foliage plant indoors until spring when they are cut back to several inches before outdoor planting. The greenhouse variety of mum will not tolerate freezing temperatures and has to be brought back inside each fall.

Kalanchoe needs adequate light to flower a second season and for this reason it is often discarded once the growth becomes too spindly indoors. Cuttings can be rooted in moist sand to carry the plant to the next season. Regular pruning will help maintain a more compact plant.

Cyclamen is one of the most attractive winter plants available. It is also one of the most difficult plants to keep looking good indoors. Cool temperatures, as low as 50° at night, are needed to keep the plant healthy. Warmer temperatures result in yellow foliage and dead flower buds.

The gardenia is an attractive foliage and flowering plant. The fragrant flowers will persist in night temperatures of 60°. Keep the plant in a sunny but cool location in the daytime. In summer move the gardenia to a lightly shaded area and never allow the soil to dry out. Keep it fertilized during the summer growing season, and return it indoors before the cool nights of early September arrive.



Dolls in many shapes and sizes fill the Music Room at Longwood Gardens this year. "Around the World with St. Nicholas," the theme of the 1992 display, features antique toys and dolls, a teddy bear collection, and a series of figures. The indoor conservatories are filled with decorated trees and 2,300 poinsettias, and 200,000 lights glisten outdoors each evening between 5 and 9 p.m.

Longwood Gardens, located on U.S. Route 1 near Kennett Square, is open daily from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. during the Christmas display. For further information, call (215) 388-6741.

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