

VILLAGE VIEW

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Flowering plants, especially those displaying red blossoms with their green foliage, are as much a part of the holiday season as lighted trees surrounded by gaily wrapped gifts, wreaths and sprays of greenery tied with red ribbon displayed on front doors, mistletoe balls hung in doorways to give courage to bashful swains, and candles glowing at windows to welcome guests.

Among the most popular and best known of Christmas plants are poinsettias, the Mexican wild flowers with dark green leaves and red leaf bracts, which attain their peaks of perfection at this season. The brilliant leaflike bracts are far more conspicuous than the true blossoms they surround; the real flowers, tiny and hardly noticeable, appear just above the bright red bracts as a cluster of yellow flowerets.

The first of these plants introduced to this country was brought home by Ambassador Joel Poinsett who in 1825 served our state department in Mexico. Although most poinsettias are grown in our climate as houseplants, in the tropics they thrive and grow to leggy shrubs, sometimes 10 or 12 feet high.

Poinsettias, until about 20 years ago, were short-lived, dropping their leaves in just a few weeks. Then, in the early 60's, a mutation developed, and now most of us find it easy to keep our poinsettias blooming until Easter or even succeed in carrying them through 'til danger of frost is past when we can set them out in the garden for the summer. With a longer blooming period came color varieties, as well; now poinsettias come with pink, white, and multi-colored leaf bracts in addition to red.

Another houseplant well-suited to Christmas is the Amaryllis. The large bulbs, about the size of small grapefruit, are usually planted one to a pot. The single bulb sends up its long green blades shortly after exposure to four or five hours of bright sunlight each day. Soon after the leaves appear, the thick flower stalk will come, or sometimes two of these. Each one produces four giant-size lily-like scarlet bloms that may measure as much as eight inches in diameter.

The greatest threat to the good health of Amaryllis is overwatering; if you're the lucky recipient of a potted bulb, give it one generous drink as soon as it arrives, and then no more until it starts to grow. Keep it warm (at least 60° at night and 70° during the day) and, once in full bloom, remove it from direct sun. The flowers should last about three weeks.

After the blossoms fade, return the plant to full sun; if you keep the soil moist and fertilize monthly, the foliage will grow luxuriantly all spring and summer. Toward the end of August, move it away from strong light, withhold water and

fertilizer, and allow it to rest. About a month before you'd like it to bloom again, cut back all the foliage to about an inch above the bulb, replace the upper inch or two of soil (without disturbing the roots), and begin again as though with a new plant.

Cyclamen, a favorite among Christmas plants, makes a charming addition to your collection most of the year. Not only are the blossoms profuse and colorful, but they're among the prettiest of all Christmassy houseplants. Cyclamen's handsome foliage is a bonus. Keep it where the light is bright but not in full sun. If given a cool climate, cyclamen will bloom copiously from October through March, and since it comes in a wide range of colors (white, pink, dark red, lavender) and a variety of forms (single, double, miniature and sweet-smelling) should give delight from Christmas through Easter.

Azaleas, although they bloom naturally only in April and May, are often found in full flower at Christmastime. When purchasing an azalea if you plan to make it a permanent addition to your garden, be sure to ask your florist for a hardy variety that can adjust to cold weather once it's planted in the ground. Keep the soil moist, give it a semi-shaded location, and use plenty of peat moss when transplanting since it's an acid-loving plant.

Unlike most evergreens, azaleas, like their cousins rhododendrons, actually like being moved. If your foundation plantings seem crowded and azaleas are among them, dig them up and set in a new location. Prune out any deadwood along with unsymmetrical branches and you'll be rewarded with luxuriant new growth next spring.

A good investment, this or any Christmas, is a live tree to plant on your property as a specimen tree after the holidays. It will grow in beauty and value for many Christmases to come. Although probably the worst thing you can do to a tree is bring it into a hot dry house from the cool damp of December, and then a week later, return it to the out-of-doors and subject it to January's bitter winds, it's worth trying. With luck, and preparation, you may get away with it.

Prepare a permanent home for the tree well before the ground freezes. Dig a hole about twice the size you think the tree's rootball will be, and fill it with packed leaves. Pile the loose dirt around the circumference of the hole and cover the dirt, too, with leaves; then spread a sheet of plastic over all, and stake or weigh down the edges with stones to keep it from blowing away.

A few weeks before Christmas, visit your garden center and choose your balled-and-burlapped Christmas tree. Live trees are heavy; you may want to arrange for Christmas Eve delivery. That's a good time to bring it into the house, and New Year's Day (if not sooner) is a fine time to set it into the ground.

Whatever plants you use to add color to your Christmastime, giving them proper care will extend your pleasure throughout the long dark days of winter that are certain to follow the holidays.