

Holiday Plant Care

During the winter holidays many people are given plants as gifts such as poinsettias, amaryllis and holiday cactus. These plants are beautiful when they are given, but often times look ugly or are dead within a few weeks. This can be prevented however, if guidelines such as proper watering and plant placement are followed.

The most common way people harm these plants is by over-watering, which can be made even worse by the decorative sleeves and plastic wraps surrounding the pot. These contain no drainage holes and this forces excess water to remain in the pot, reducing the amount of oxygen in the soil. The lack of oxygen causes plant roots to rot and leaves to turn yellow. When people see yellow leaves, they assume the plant is not receiving enough water, and their first reaction is to give the plant more, making the problem worse. If possible, permanently remove the decorative sleeve from the pot. Doing so greatly benefits the plant.

Many people like to use a set schedule to water indoor plants. This is not always the best because how much water a plant needs varies according to plant life cycles and seasonal light and temperature differences in the house. For example a plant growing near a window receives greater amounts of light and higher temperatures than in the winter. Because of this, plants generally use less water in the winter than in the summer. A better method to determine when to water is to just physically check the soil in the pot by sticking your finger an inch or two into the potting soil. If the soil is moist, wait a few days and check again. When the soil is on the drier side, remove the plant from the sleeve (if you have left the pot in it) and water it thoroughly in the sink with lukewarm water. Cache County's cold water can sometimes shock houseplants. Let excess water drain from the pot for a half hour to an hour before putting it back in its sleeve.

Placing plants in well lit areas away from cold air drafts and heat vents is also important in extending their attractiveness. Bright light makes plants healthier, but both hot-dry and cold air causes leaf scorch, premature leaf and flower drop, and death in severe cases. Amaryllis and other forced bulbs are especially sensitive to low light levels have a tendency to become "floppy" when they receive too little light.

Other items to note:

- Christmas cactus will bloom all winter if they are placed near windows or sliding glass doors. Cooler air near the window induces plant to form flower buds. Rotate the pot 180 degrees every six weeks or so for a nice flower display all winter long. Keeping soil on the drier side also encourages flowering. Fertilize holiday cactus in the spring and summer only with a complete liquid nutrient solution or a slow-release fertilizer specifically designed for house plants.
- If you want to try something new, amaryllis and poinsettias can be maintained for several years instead of just throwing them away. This requires some extra work though. Both should be allowed to grow in bright light until mid-summer. The amaryllis leaves will start to yellow by this time. When this happens, stop watering the plant and cut the leaves near the base. Allow the bulb to sit for at least six weeks and then start watering it again. Poinsettias should be cut back in mid-summer also and allowed to grow back, but need at least 12 hours of complete darkness nightly for 8-12 weeks (depending on the variety) before they will change colors. This

involves placing them in a closet or other dark areas nightly for the entire time. If they miss even one night of this or are accidentally exposed to bright light, you need to start the process over. Remember to water the plant(s) regularly during this process. For more information on poinsettia care visit the following web address: http://extension.usu.edu/htm/faq/faq_q=84.