

Choosing Holiday Beauties and How to Care for Them

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Question: I love the holiday plants. As beautiful as holiday plants are in the store, I need some help. I can't resist the colorful and awesome blossoms but, they don't remain beautiful for very long when I get them home. How can I care for these gems and keep them around for a long time?

Answer: Since the beginning of time plants have played a role in the celebrations of mankind. Nature's beauty has played an important role in our everyday lives, customs, and festivals. Flowering and foliage plants, trees, and shrubs make wonderful holiday gifts. At the store or local garden center, there are many gift choices that are calling your name and saying "take me home with you". Holiday plant choices include Poinsettia, African Violet, Amaryllis, Azalea, Holiday Cactus, Christmas Pepper, Cyclamen, Foliage Plants, Kalanchoe, Orchids, Paperwhites, and live Christmas trees. The UGA Extension service provides helpful guidelines for selecting and caring for holiday flowers and plants.

Many flowering plants, even with the best care and conditions, only last a few weeks. One must remember how long they remain attractive and how long they thrive. This will be directly related to the care and attention they are given. Most importantly, check plants before purchase to make sure that they are healthy and are free of bugs or disease. It is important to know the specific requirements of water, light, and temperature for each type of plant. This information is available from the retailer, florist, on the internet, or by contacting a Carroll County Master Gardener Volunteer at the Extension Office in Carrollton. Here are some important things to consider when selecting and caring for holiday plants.

Proper watering is critical. Holiday plants often arrive in waterproof containers or are wrapped in foil. Remove the pot coverings or punch holes in the bottom of the pot to promote good drainage. Place the pot in a saucer to protect furniture. Large plants in small containers dry out quickly. Heat and low humidity conditions during the winter can be disastrous for plants. Check plants daily and water only when the soil is nearly dry to the touch. Then, apply enough water that some drains from the bottom of the pot. Any excess water should be discarded. Do not allow plants to wilt and water with room temperature water. Over watering can be just as harmful as under-watering. Misting plants is not advised and can lead to foliar disease.

Make sure that plants have adequate light. If natural light is not available, most plants can be placed under grow lamps. Check individual plants for light requirements. Usually plants come

with a tag stating the proper light requirements. Too much bright light or inadequate low light levels will hasten the decline of most indoor plants.

Most plants are happy with household temperatures in a range of 60-75 degrees F. Cooler temps 60-65 degrees tend to lengthen the life of flowering plants. Higher temps of 75-80 degrees will shorten the time that plants stay in flower. Some plants decline rapidly in heat and others are sensitive to chilling temps. Avoid rapid changes in temperature by placing plants away from heat and air conditioning vents and away from drafty doors.

You do not need to fertilize flowering plants during the Holiday season. If you are successful and plants are kept for several months, they may benefit from occasional fertilizing. Use a water-soluble or slow- release fertilizer. These are easy to use, but be sure to follow label directions. Plants that are kept for longer times will eventually outgrow their pots and will need to be repotted. Choose an appropriate size container and use the proper potting mix. These are available at the local nursery or retailer.

Good luck and much happiness with the holiday beauties. Keep these reminders in mind as you enjoy a joyous holiday season. For more information on all your horticulture questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Volunteer at the UGA Extension Carroll County Office at 900 Newnan Road., 770-836-8546 or via email at ccmg@uga.edu.