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Care of Specialty Potted Plants

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Improper water and light,and excessive heat are the leading causes of failure in caring for gift plants. These plants are grown in greenhouses, where the nighttime temperatures are cool, light is adequate, and the air is moist. When they are brought into a dry home, where the light is poor and the temperatures are maintained for human comfort, results are frequently disappointing. Do not expect to keep a gift plant from year to year. Enjoy them while they are attractive and in season, and then discard.

Poinsettias

The poinsettia requires bright light and should be kept away from drafts. A temperature between 65 and 70°F is ideal. Avoid temperatures below 60°F and above 75°F. Keep plants well-watered but do not overwater - let the soil dry between watering. Some of the newer, long-lasting varieties can be kept attractive all winter.

Gardeners frequently ask whether they can carry their poinsettias over to bloom again next year. The quality of home-grown plants seldom equals that of commercially grown plants. However, for those who wish to try, the following procedure can be followed.

After the showy bracts fade or fall, set the plants where they will receive indirect light and temperatures around 55 to 60°F. Water sparingly during this time, just enough to keep the stems from shriveling. Cut the plant back to within 5 inches of the soil surface and re-pot in fresh soil. As soon as new growth begins, place in a well-lighted window. After danger of frost, place the pot outdoors in a partially shaded spot. Pinch the new growth back to produce a plant with several stems. Do not pinch after September 1st. About Labor Day, or as soon as the nights are cool, bring the plant indoors. Continue to grow in a sunny room with a night temperature of about 65°F. Since the poinsettia blooms only during short days, exclude artificial light, either by covering with a light-proof box each evening or placing in an unlighted room or closet for a minimum of 12 hours of darkness. Plants require full light in the daytime, so be sure to return them to a sunny window. Start the short-day treatment in mid-September to have blooms between December 1 and Christmas.

Azaleas

Azaleas require direct sunlight to remain healthy. A nighttime temperature of 60°F will prolong the period of bloom. Keep the soil constantly moist, but not soggy. If the leaves should turn yellow, the soil is not acid enough. Use any commercial acid fertilizer and follow the application instructions. Do not use softened water. When repotting, use a potting soil high in sphagnum peat moss.

Azaleas can be planted, pot and all, in a shady spot in the garden during the summer months. Examine them frequently and keep them well-watered during dry periods. Greenhouse azaleas are not hardy,and need to be brought indoors before freezing weather.

Azaleas need a cool, rest period before they are forced into bloom. Place the plants in a room with filtered light and a temperature between 40-50°F. During this rest period, flower buds will develop. Then place in a well-lighted, warm (65°F) room around January 1 to bring them into bloom. Unless you have the proper growing conditions for the azalea, you should not attempt to carry the plants over in the house.

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Gardenia

Gardenias grown indoors need special care. They demand an acid soil and should receive the same nutritional care as azaleas. Nighttime temperatures should be near 60°F and the humidity around the plant should be kept high. High temperature and low light intensity will result in flower bud drop. Gardenias are hardy in the warmest parts of Virginia, but will not reliably overwinter outside of Zone 7b.

Amaryllis

The secret of growing amaryllis is to keep the plants actively growing after they finish blooming. Keep the plants in full sun, with a nighttime temperature above 60°F. As soon as danger of frost has passed, set the plants in the garden in a semi-shaded spot and continue to water. Bring them in during the first part of September. Stop watering to allow old growth to die back, and store in a cool, dark place to rest. Your amaryllis will be ready to force again about November 1. Bring them into a warm, well lighted room and water moderately to begin a new growth and flowering cycle.

Christmas Cactus

The Christmas cactus has become increasingly popular with the development of several new varieties. At least three related species are sold in addition to a number of cultivars. All have similar cultural requirements.

The secret of good bloom is influenced by nighttime temperature and photoperiod control. Christmas cacti will develop buds and bloom if given bright light, short days, and night temperatures between 55 and 65°F. Christmas cacti bloom best when somewhat pot-bound. Repotting is necessary only about once every 3 years. Full sunlight is beneficial in midwinter, but excessively bright light during summer months can make plants look pale and yellow.

Christmas cacti require less water from October to March than they do when actively growing from April to September. A rest period is very important if plants are to bloom abundantly. Dormancy should be started about the middle of September and continued for 8 weeks. Care should be taken that the soil never becomes water-logged during the short days of winter.

Cyclamen

Cyclamens require full sunlight and a nighttime temperature between 50 and 60˚F. They are heavy users of water and must be watered whenever the surface of the soil is dry. Flower buds will fail to develop if the nighttime temperature is too high or if the light levels are poor.

Cyclamen can be carried over, but as with the poinsettia, homegrown plants are seldom equal to those grown by a commercial grower. Let the leaves die back after they finish flowering. Allow resting bulbs to dry, but do not allow them to become shriveled. Repot the fleshy tuber in June with the top of the structure above the soil line. Use a slightly similar pot size each year, as cyclamens perform best when slightly pot-bound.

Gerbera Daisy

Gerbera Daisies should be considered as a short-term plant which should be replaced after 2-3 years maximum. Their showy flowers are long-lasting, and plants should be kept in a temperature range of 40 to 70˚F when in flower. They respond well under bright light, with limited full sunlight exposure. Repotting can be done in spring when dividing plants in a peat moss-based potting mix. Allow the soil to dry thoroughly between waterings. Susceptible to thrips and mites.

Calceolaria

Calceolarias require bright light, but no direct sunlight in order to flower optimally. They should be grown in a fairly cool environment with a 50˚F daytime temperature and a 45˚F night temperature. Plants should be kept moist at all times and should not be allowed to dry, but be careful that soil is not soggy. After flowers have faded, discard the plant.

Cineraria

Cinerarias require bright light with a minimal amount of direct sunlight. To prolong the flowering period, plants should be kept in a cool environment at a temperature of about 50˚F. The soil or medium should be kept consistently moist at all times. Once flowers have faded, the plants should be discarded.

Kalanchoe

Kalanchoes are a diverse group of plants grown as either flowering or foliage plants. They should be grown under bright light, but short periods in direct sun (especially in winter) will be acceptable. Normal room temperature, at a minimum of 50˚F, will promote good growth and flower development. Plants should be watered sparingly in summer and allowed to dry out somewhat during winter when at rest. Some cultivars are difficult to bring into flowering for a second cycle, and should be discarded after flowering. If repotting, an all-purpose soil or potting mix can be used. All kalanchoes are short-day plants requiring a minimum of 14 to 18 hours of uninterrupted darkness for 4 to 6 weeks to initiate flowers.

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