

Dig This by PegTillery (for 12-24-08 or 12-31-08) Holiday Plants – What to do? © 2008

What do we do with those wonderfully colorful holiday plants we just can't resist? This is the dilemma many of us face each year, especially if we love plants and hate to throw away a plant that is still looking very appealing and healthy.

Poinsettias

These beauties now come in a wide range of colors and shades – yellow, white, pink, magenta, crimson, candy stripes, spotted (red on white and white on red) and just plain red. The colored foliage we see is really leaves and the true flowers are the green and yellow b-b shaped structures you see in the center of all the color.

Water poinsettias each week (keeping soil moist, not soggy) and they'll continue to reward you with colorful foliage until at least March. Then just consider them an annual and allow yourself to throw them out with the trash or you could even add them to your compost. Do not put them in your worm bin because Poinsettias are a euphorbia and the sap is latex like that would make your worms very ill.

Some gardeners keep their poinsettias growing for many years. In Mexico poinsettias grow into trees. Visit <http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/poinsettia/facts.cfm> for more info.

Holiday Cacti

Here's the straight scoop on holiday cacti found in stores during spring, fall and winter. They're quite easy to grow and very forgiving plants. They're epiphytic plants native to Brazil growing in trees in the Organ Mountains (22 south latitude). Temperatures are usually a constant 60-70 F and rainfall is 17 inches per month during December through March.

We've known them as Schlumbergera and some plant tags might label them Zygocactus, Ephiphyllum, Rhipsalidopsis, Cereus or Cactus. Schlumbergera were named after a Belgian horticulturist, Frederick Schlumberger. Europeans call it "Crab cactus." (Look at the leaves.) In Brazil the plant flowers during April and May. Leaves of Schlumbergera have (joints) with serrated edges. Rhipsalidopsis have narrower more rounded leaves with tiny hairs along the edges. Some Rhipsalidopsis look fern like.

Blooms of all these holiday cacti are bright and colorful in shades of red, pink, purple, orange, yellow and white. The Schlumbergera flowers are longer with blooms strung together festooning the tips of the leaf segments. Rhipsalidopsis blooms are star shaped single flowers, again on the tips of the leaves.

Many recommend cold temperatures, special soil, and periods of dry soil to get these cacti to bloom. Most commonly you'll read "put the plant in a cold place (garage) for several weeks or months to gain blooms." Researchers found that letting the cacti dry out actually inhibits bloom. And, in a garage, you could lose the plant to chill or neglect. Remember where the plants grow in nature. Their growing conditions are actually similar to orchids and African violets.

African violet potting soil is a good growing medium as is regular potting soil. Don't use a cactus mix (it drains too quickly). Holiday cacti like plenty of light but not direct sunlight. If you have success growing African violets place the cacti in the same area and they'll do fine. These holiday cacti will actually flower two to four times a year. Use a liquid fertilizer (12-15-10 such as Schultz) about once a month. Basically these plants thrive on neglect. Water about every other week in the winter and once a week in the summer. They also enjoy being potbound so no need to pot up very often.