



## “From the Potting Shed”

Riverview Garden Club – Helpful Hints  
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‘Tis the season for decorating with beautiful holiday plants! Poinsettias and amaryllises are favorites this time of year. A few other winter-bloomers to consider are paper whites, cyclamen, and Christmas cactus. Here are some tips from garden author Lynn Coulter for turning these holiday beauties into long-lasting houseplants.

### **Poinsettias**

The key to caring for poinsettias is knowing these colorful plants are tropicals and that drafts will often cause them to lose leaves. Keep your poinsettia where the daytime temperature ranges from 65 to 70 degrees and move it to a spot about 60 degrees at night. Grow your poinsettia by a sunny window, but don’t let it touch the glass, where heat or cold can damage it.

Most of all, avoid over-watering. Wait until the soil feels dry before you water, and don’t leave water standing in the saucer or in any foil wrapped around the pot.

If the leaves wilt, and the soil gets dry to the touch, water your poinsettia right away. But remember wilting or dropping leaves can also be a sign of over watering. If the soil is soggy when the leaves fall, you’ve watered too much.

Poinsettias can stay attractive for months. But it’s tricky to get them to re-bloom. To coax your plant back into bloom, let it dry out gradually starting in April. Water just enough to keep the stem from shriveling and put the plant in a spot that stays about 60 degrees.

In mid-May, prune the stems to 4” high and repot the poinsettia in a slightly larger pot. Move it to a warm location with good light, and resume watering. When new growth emerges, fertilize every two weeks with a complete fertilizer.

In July, pinch back the stems. Pinch again in mid-August. Poinsettias need 10 weeks of 12 hours or less of sunlight each day to show color. For Christmas flowers, keep the plant in complete darkness from 5 p.m. to 8 a.m. daily, starting around Oct. 1.

*This is usually too much work for most of us, so don’t feel bad if you compost your poinsettia after you’ve enjoyed it indoors!*

## **Amaryllis**

Pre-packaged amaryllis are easy to grow. All you need to do is open the box, take out the pot, water and wait for flowers to appear. The blooms last longer in a cool room.

When the flowers fade, cut the stem back to two inches above the bulb, and put the plant in a sunny window. Water when the soil feels dry and fertilize every 2 to 4 weeks with a water-soluble fertilizer.

Move your amaryllis outside in late May or early June, gradually giving it more sun. Water and feed as needed, but don't re-pot. These bulbs like to be pot-bound.

Bring the bulb in before frost. It needs to go dormant before forming new flowers, so keep it at 50 to 55 degrees Fahrenheit for 8 to 10 weeks. Don't water or fertilize during this time.

To re-start the growth cycle, add a ½" of fresh soil to the pot and return it to a warm, well-lit room. Water once until new leaves appear. You may not get flowers every year; sometimes the bulb needs a couple of years to gather enough energy for them. Just repeat this cycle of care until flowers emerge, or – as with other holiday plants — compost the bulb and buy a new one.

## **Christmas Cactus**

Like most holiday plants, Christmas cacti keep their blooms longer when they're in a cool room. Give your plant bright, indirect light and keep it away from drafts and heat vents.

Despite their common name, Christmas cacti are succulents, and aren't as drought tolerant as you might think. Water only when the top half of the soil is dry.

When the flowers fade, move your cactus to a sunny window, or put it outdoors for the summer in partial shade. When the temperatures drop in fall, start bringing the plant back in, gradually increasing the time it's indoors to let it adjust to the lower light levels.

A true Christmas cactus needs 2 to 3 months to set blooms in time for the holiday.

A Thanksgiving cactus needs about 6 weeks to bloom. Count backward from the appropriate holiday to know when to start your plant's re-blooming cycle.

For Christmas flowers, stop watering in October and move the cactus to a cool spot (about 60 degrees at night) where it gets no more than 9 hours of light a day. Some people put a box over their plant each morning and remove it at night. Water about once a week when the flower buds start to swell.

## Paperwhites

Pretty paperwhites are often forced to bloom at Christmas time resting on pebbles in water or planted in soil. If the stems threaten to fall over, tie them loosely to a small stake or twig using raffia or ribbon. Keeping the flowers in a brightly lit spot will help prevent weak stems.

Once the flowers open, move them out of direct light and into a cooler spot so they'll last longer. If the bulbs are planted in soil, keep it lightly moist. If they're in water, add more water as needed.

Even when they're transplanted to the garden, paperwhites seldom rebloom, having already used up all their energy during forcing. Toss them in the compost when they're finished, or take a chance, if you wish, and plant them to see what happens.

## Cyclamen

While some cyclamen species are hardy to USDA zones 7 and up, most sold during the holidays are florist's cyclamen, or *Cyclamen persicum*, and can't survive below 50 degrees Fahrenheit.

After your cyclamen finishes blooming, let the plant gradually dry out for 2 to 3 months to induce dormancy. You can move it outdoors then; there's usually not much to look at, anyway, because the leaves often die by April. Turn the pot on its side or check it often so rainwater doesn't accumulate and cause the tuber to rot. While the plant is dormant, repot it in fresh soil.

Start watering again when new growth appears, usually in September, and bring your cyclamen in before the temperatures drop to 50 degrees. Give it bright, indirect light and good humidity, and new flowers should eventually appear, although there may not be as many as before.

**Happy Holiday Gardening!**