

Gardeners December Hit List

By Teresa Gaffner

December is here and the holidays are only weeks away. Garden chores this month are all about cleaning the yard, the flower and vegetable beds and getting them ready for winter. If you haven't mulched your garden beds, it's not too late to do so. Be sure to check your seed catalogues and plan your spring garden, many seeds can be started in the last week in January. Order them now to ensure they will be in stock. Late winter/early spring pruning is just around the corner, and you can spend some time brushing up on your basic pruning skills by checking out this in depth and easy to understand publication from the University of Tennessee.

<https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/documents/pb1619.pdf>

There is always good shopping available in December but not everyone thinks about visiting their local nursery for inspiration. Right now, all types of holiday themed plants and grow kits are available. Everything from bulbs, herb topiaries, fresh evergreen wreaths, poinsettias to seasonal flowering plants are available. Birding supplies, gardening books and tools are also great gifts for the gardener or naturalist in your life. If you do plan on purchasing holiday plants for yourself or as a gift, please check out the links at the end of this article for some sound advice on purchasing and maintaining your holiday plants.

Let's review 3 of the most common holiday plants purchased.

Poinsettias

Choose a poinsettia with small, tightly clustered yellow buds in the center and healthy, vibrant green leaves and stems. Check the soil and under the leaves for insects before buying. Once home, it should be kept in an area with a stable environment-away from drafts from open doors or windows and not on top of the TV. Check it for water by testing the soil with your finger, if it feels dry up to the first joint of your forefinger, water it until the soil is moistened but do not let it sit in water. Trim off all dead leaves and don't let them sit on the pot's soil.

Fertilize your poinsettia in late January and plan to repot it before the summer. If it gets too leggy, trim it back a few inches-it can take it. During the summer it should do well outside on a covered patio or in shade. Poinsettias come in all shades of red, pink, and white with solid colors and variations. There is even an orange variety called "Orange Spice" for the UT fans.

Amaryllis

This beautiful flowering bulb comes in a variety of shapes and colors and is also a traditional Christmas gift. The large bell-shaped or lily-like flowers of the amaryllis make excellent potted plants. An Amaryllis bulb will usually produce 1-2 stems with 3-4 flowers per stem. You can find them already planted but if you want to pot your own the rule of thumb is to plant the bulb in a container that is one to two inches larger in diameter than the base of the bulb.

One third to one half of the top of the bulb should show above the soil. This ensures that the "nose" of the bulb stays dry and does not attract fungus. Good drainage is a must, a soil mix of half peat and perlite is an excellent medium for growing potted bulbs. Water well after planting and thereafter as needed to keep the soil moist but not wet. Your Amaryllis will need about 4 hours of direct sunlight per day and prefers an ambient room temperature of about 70°F.

Once your leaves start to grow, fertilize twice a month with a water-soluble fertilizer. A water-soluble fertilizer is gentler on your plants system and will dissipate and wash out of the soil with subsequent waterings. It is highly recommended for all potted house plants-not just bulbs. Once steady summer temperatures have set in, you can set or plant your Amaryllis outside-pot and all-until the cooler temps of fall arrive.

Christmas Cactus

This might be the easiest of all the traditional holiday plants to grow. They last so long they become family heirlooms. The Christmas, Easter, or Thanksgiving Cactus, as they are commonly known, are originally from Brazil and grow there in the rain forest in trees and rocks like orchids do. They bloom seasonally, which corresponds with their holiday names, but don't be surprised if they bloom out of season or more than once a year. Your holiday cactus thrives in bright light to partial shade. Keep the soil moist during the flowering period and let it dry out between waterings after the flowers are spent. You will eventually need to repot this beauty and it's best to use a cactus or a succulent soil to ensure good drainage.

The three plants listed above are some of the most common plants given as gifts during the holidays, but also consider cyclamens, hellebores, paperwhites and kalanchoes for colorful blooms. A topiary of rosemary or ivy can add a festive touch of green. You can also find plenty of potted evergreens, living wreaths and centerpieces this time of year. Below you will find links to some great websites that will help you choose and care for your holiday plants.

<https://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheet/holiday-decorating-with-fresh-greenery/>

<https://extension.unh.edu/resource/poinsettias-care-and-reflowering-fact-sheet>

<https://extension.illinois.edu/blogs/good-growing/2021-12-03-how-take-care-amaryllis-and-get-them-rebloom>

<https://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheet/thanksgiving-christmas-cacti/>

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, "ASK A MASTER GARDENER" to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.