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Plants can make great Christmas gifts

Giving a life plant often conveys the personal warmth and friendship found in the spirit of the holidays better than any other gift, according to Greg Patchan, horticulture agent for Michigan State University (MSU) Extension Service. Patchan recommends giving a poinsettia, Christmas cactus and Jerusalem cherry, three plants that have become associated with Christmas and don't require much care.

The poinsettia, originally a native of Mexico, is the most striking of all holiday plants, Patchan said. A poinsettia should be kept near a sunny window or other well lighted area that's free of drafts and rapid temperature changes. Water when soil is slightly dry to touch but don't allow it to become too dry or waterlogged.

Patchan recommends fertilizing about once a month with general houseplant fertilizer. To help the plant maintain its shape, cut the original stems back to about six inches in February or early March.

In the spring, repot into a larger pot using good potting soil and after night temperatures begin exceeding 50 degrees Fahrenheit, sink the pot up to the rim in a well drained, slightly shaded area out side. Then between July 15 and Aug. 1, cut off the terminal portions of all shoots and root them in peat moss and sand. These shoots, once potted, will flower for Christmas, as will the parent plant.

Patchan also recommends contriving the day length for the poinsettia since it has its own biological clock. Simply cover the plant or place it in the dark between 5 p.m. and 8 a.m. daily from the end of September and until flower color starts to show.

THE CHRISTMAS CACTUS makes a nice gift to gift-give because of its spectacular blooms that look like an exotic bird in flight.

A slow-growing succulent plant composed of many toothed, leaf-like segments, the Christmas cactus can't tolerate parched conditions under which other cacti thrive. MSU horticulturists advise watering the plant when the soil surface starts to dry.

The cactus should be potted in equal parts potting soil and peat moss. It doesn't do well in typical sandy cactus mixture.

To care for it, fertilize the Christmas cactus once or twice a month with a standard houseplant fertilizer when the plant is growing vigorously. Full sun in fall and winter and bright diffuse light in spring and summer are the best. For good growth, the cactus likes average home temperatures and humidity levels.

To bloom Christmas cacti like short days and long nights until buds have formed. At all times, keep the plant out of hot drafts and areas where the light is dim. Low light levels or high temperatures cause flower buds to drop off.

THE THIRD recommended plant gift is the

Jerusalem Cherry, a plant that grows its own decorations.

A member of the nightshade family, Jerusalem cherries bear colorful fruits around the holidays. Since the fruits are poisonous, horticulturists suggest not giving the plant to a family with children.

To keep the fruits on the plant for a maximum time, keep it cool and give it full sun. Night temperatures of 40-50 degrees Fahrenheit aren't too cool.

The Jerusalem cherry should be potted in equal parts sand and peat moss, with provisions for good drainage. Water whenever the soil feels dry.

A common problem is leaf drop. This can be caused by insufficient water, high temperatures and drafts.

After the cherry has fruited, it's not worth saving for another year. The horticulturists suggest saving the fruit for seed and discarding the parent plant. Dry the seeds and sow them early in March in a sand-peat mixture. The seeds need temperatures of 70-75 degrees Fahrenheit for germination.

When the plants are four to six weeks old, transplant them into four-inch pots and place them where they'll get bright light and cool temperatures around 55 degrees Fahrenheit. Place the young plants outdoors in a shady spot for the summer and check them regularly, watering often enough to prevent wilting. Fertilize every month but avoid overdoing it or you'll get lush foliage but poor fruit set.

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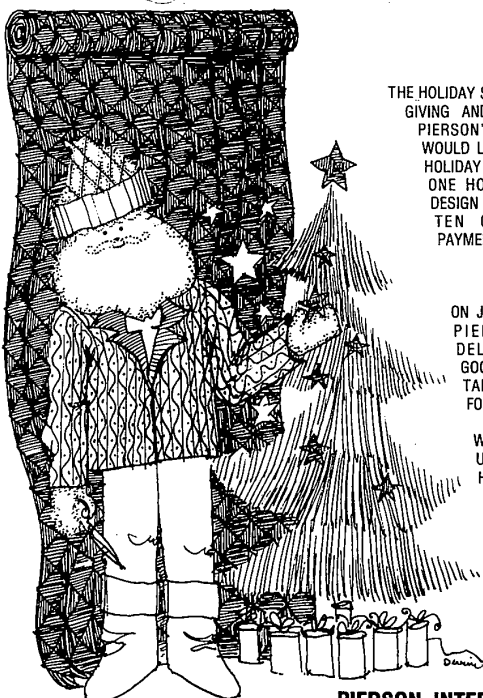
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