

Holiday plants deserve effort

By MARGE ALPERN

Crowers, florists and even the people who buy new plants are beginning to take a new look at these spectacular masses of bloom so often presented on holidays.

Many such plants have been grieved for the occasion by controlled light, heat and feeding in special greenhouses to meet a holiday deadline in perfect color, size and shape.

The cyclamens, poinsettias, cinerarias, chrysanthemums, cyclamen and Easter lily all should be enjoyed for what they are—houseplants growing in a pot. Generally, the grower will attach to the gift plant careful cultivation directions which are helpful and should be followed. They usually suggest good light, even moisture and cool temperature.

The majority of these plants are essentially "throwaways," and when they are finished blooming, they should be discarded. They aren't houseplants.

Unless one is willing to go to great lengths to provide the proper conditions, attempts to rehouse them in the house usually are doomed. Having a greenhouse, of course, makes success more attainable, and the great increase in the number of home greenhouses is helping to keep these plants popular as gifts.

The latest trend in gift giving is toward more permanent plants that can give years of pleasure on the window sill. Florists and plant shops are offering a large array of easy-to-grow begonias, brilliant bromeliads and superior varieties of a wide range of foliage plants. House plants certainly have a permanent place in our homes today, but the chrysanthemums at Thanksgiving, the poinsettias at Christmas and the Easter lily at Easter also have special places in our lives and with a little care, they can give us much pleasure.

THE POINSETTIAS now being sold are a great improvement over those of a few years ago. In fact, they actually are useful, long-lasting plants. A warm sunny window is an excellent place for a winter display, and a dim light will definitely shorten the plant's life.

When the soil feels dry to the touch, water until the water comes out the drainage holes. In our dry, overheated homes, try to find a cool spot for your holiday plants.

The poinsettias have recently been given a clean bill of health by the American Horticultural Society. However, some people still fear that the white, milky substance found inside the plant (characteristic of the Euphorbia family to which the poinsettia belongs) is poisonous or at least can cause an allergic reaction in some people.

The plants can be cut back after they have bloomed and "carried over" outdoors during the summer. Poinsettia plants are called short-day plants, which means they must be given a time-controlled period of reduced daylight, a process requiring careful attention. They must have 14 hours of darkness to set buds, so you should put them in an unused room or closet every night during the fall.

Generally, the plants that I have seen that have been carried over look inferior. Sigrids Pritchard of Franklin, however, has successfully brought poinsettias through a second year of bloom. She believes it's not at all difficult. I prefer cutting the stems when the flowers begin to fade, putting them in a vase and discarding the plant into the compost. By burning the cut edge of the stem with a lighted match, the flow of the milky sap will be stopped and the bloom will keep nicely in water. I save my Bordine poinsettia coupons throughout the year and let Mr. Bordine worry about growing them. He does it exceptionally well.

THE CYCLAMEN, another winter-blooming gift plant, is usually sold with several flowers and many buds in all stages of development. They are stunning and generally expensive.

Cyclamen demand a really cool spot. In the winter, you'll get more blooms than a week of blooming if you let the plant move to a cool hallway or garage for the night. They also seem to need a great deal of water and will show you at once when the need is urgent by flopping down on all sides. A good thorough watering perks them up.

Avoid rotting the corn, the bulb from which the cyclamen grow, by not pouring water directly into the heart of the plant. This is good practice for the health of many plants.

With attentive care, you probably can coax bloom from your Christmas cyclamen until March. Recycling them takes skill and experience, but it can be done. Most growers suggest drying the corn after the winter bloom is completed and allowing the

curing process to last several months, before starting them back to live in the summer.

This didn't work for me, and the corn got dried out—forever. I could not revive it, and from another corn I tried to restart, there was limited growth and absolutely no flowers.

My experience has been with the cyclamens that produce small corns, not the huge ones. I've had limited success with my success. After the plants finished blooming in the greenhouse last March, I reduced watering, but didn't allow them to go dormant.

During the summer, the plants were lifted from their pots and sunk into the ground, and they took off. Since cyclamen like cool weather, I left them out until late fall, when I reported the corn in rich, well-drained soil, allowing it to sit up, like a bun, halfway out of the pot. Today, in the coolest zone of the greenhouse, one is covered with a layer of soil, and the other is just forming a mound of little buds.

One commercial grower does not advise keeping the same corn for more than two or three years. At the end of that time, the quality of the flowers begins to deteriorate, although the second-year corn should produce a larger quantity of flowers than the first-year corn.

That's exactly what happened to my white cyclamen—many more blossoms than it had last year, and they are smaller. I really don't mind the diminished size, myself, since whopping-size flowers hold no special appeal for me—cyclamen, orchids or roses. But, that is a matter of taste.

Azaleas, like the cyclamen, need a cool location. At night, they must be where the temperature falls as low as 60 degrees (a drop of 10 degrees from daytime temperature) if they are to continue blooming.

If you cannot meet these rather specific requirements, don't expect all those enticing buds that come on these two plants to open or the foliage to remain in good condition. Azaleas don't react quite as quickly to unfavorable conditions as cyclamen and will hold up amazingly well in a warm atmosphere, even though some of the buds dry up.

Azaleas need a great deal of water to get abundant bloom. The plants have been grown in a pot-bound state with tightly packed roots in the smallest possible pot. There is little soil left in the pot to absorb any water, therefore, azaleas must be watered almost every day. An occasional dunking of the whole pot into a bucket of water, allowing the pot to soak until the air bubbles stop rising, is advisable.

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