

Houseplants make perfect holiday gifts

Many houseplants make perfect Christmas gifts and will bring much pleasure for a long time. After all the holiday trappings have been put away, blooming houseplants will add a nice fresh accent to your home.

A year ago I received an African gardenia, *Mitrostigma axillare*, from my friend Julia Janiak, and it is blooming for the third time in just one year. It has stayed small and is still in its original pot.

I keep it in a bathroom that has a north-facing window and a skylight, water it when necessary (always letting the water run through to the saucer), and fertilize it a couple of times a year in spring and summer. The pretty, star-shaped, white flowers have a delicate perfume.

Edith Hoffman of Southfield gave another interesting plant to me. It has an upright rosette of dark, olive green, lance-shaped foliage with a deep, iridescent maroon underside.

This "Moses in the cradle," *Rhoeo bermudensis*, has an unusual habit of blooming. Above each leaf base a number of small, white flowers are tucked between two large bracts. You have to look carefully to see the little babes.

I keep my plant in a west window covered by closed Venetian blinds. I water when the soil is dry and fertilize occasionally.

Christmas cactus

These plants have been very easy to care for, sometimes neglected, and are still going strong. Here is some information about traditional plants sold for Christmas gifts that will be sure to please the recipient:

The Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*) is popular now. It needs to be kept in bright light, especially when it is in bud. It's best to resist the urge to move the cactus from that location at this time to prevent bud drop.

In its native Brazil, the Christmas cactus grows on trees and water drains readily; this then is the clue to use a soil that drains well.

After the plant has flowered, prune it by cutting off a few of the "links" or sections from

each stem tip. Water when the top half of the soil in the pot feels very dry. Discard excess water. Fertilize with a product for flowering houseplants, following package directions, from early spring through summer.

The Christmas cactus and her cousins, the Easter and Thanksgiving cacti, are often confused. Here's how to tell one from the other: The Christmas cactus has scalloped margins, and its blooms are generally found at the stem tips only. The Easter cactus is more likely to bloom between the stem segments, as well as at the stem tips. The Thanksgiving cactus has two to four pointy teeth along the margins of the stem segments, and blooms are generally found at the stem tips.

Poinsettia

The ever-popular poinsettia needs no description. The flowers of this plant are actually the tiny yellow berries, not the colorful bracts.

When choosing a poinsettia, look for tightly clustered, small central flowers with a crisp and bright foliage. When the green foliage is down to the soil line,

it indicates the plant has active, healthy roots.

Water thoroughly when soil is dry to the touch; discard excess water in the saucer. Poinsettias need at least six hours of natural light, bright enough to read by, to retain color. Shield from direct sun rays.

Average house temperatures of around 72 degrees and night temperatures around 60 degrees are ideal. Poinsettias will appreciate an application of flowering houseplant fertilizer every two weeks.

Others

Amaryllis grows best in warm temperatures, but the flowers will last longer in temperatures ranging from 60 to 70 degrees.

Water them generously, which helps maintain sufficient weight in the pot to balance the heavy blooms. When the blooms wither, cut off the stalk near the neck of the bulb, and move the plant to a sunny, warm window.

Kalanchoes can survive dry air, considerable heat and even dry soil because they are succu-

lent plants and hold water in their leaves. They will last quite a long time and should be treated the same way as poinsettias. Adequate light encourages good flowering.

There you have it. Do check the soil when you take the plant home (or when you receive a plant). A good way to do this is to pinch a little of the surface soil with your fingers. It should feel moist, but not muddy-wet. Add water when the surface soil begins to feel dry.

Take a look at the different flowers in the nurseries when shopping - who knows what beauty you may find!

I wish you all the safest and happiest holiday during these solemn times. As Tiny Tim says, "God bless us every one!"

Gift idea

Need a special holiday gift? Give a gift that will be remembered for many years. There is still space on my river cruise to Holland, Belgium and the Floride. Price is all-inclusive. Call Jean at The World of Travel at (248) 203-0022 for a brochure and to register.



Blooming gifts: Plants, such as this African gardenia given to Marty Figley, make lovely holiday gifts.

Marty Figley is an advanced master gardener based in Birmingham. You can leave her a message by dialing (734) 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone. Her fax number is (248) 644-1314.

GARDEN SPOT

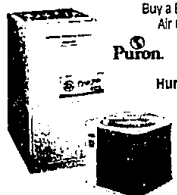


MARTY FIGLEY

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