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Flowering potted plants are often purchased throughout the year as gifts or for interior decoration. These greenhouse-grown flowers make colorful displays, especially during holiday seasons. Proper care can increase the display period of flowers, but few of these plants can permanently be kept in bloom in homes.

Flowering potted plants are grown under ideal greenhouse conditions. Their growth is optimized so that they will flower when they are sold. Under home conditions, most of these plants should be considered much like fresh cut flowers.

PURCHASING TIPS

- There are several things to look for when purchasing a flowering plant.
- Look for a healthy root system. Healthy roots will be white.
- Check for signs of insects or diseases. None should be obvious.
- Choose a plant with some unopened buds on it to extend the plant’s bloom time. A simple rule of thumb is that 1/3 of the flowers should be fully open, 1/3 of the buds should be showing color, and 1/3 of the buds should still be tight at purchase time.
- Look for healthy foliage. There should be a minimum of mechanical damage, and the leaves should be clean.



LIGHT

Plants seldom receive as much light in a home environment as in a greenhouse, so give them as much light as possible by placing them where they will receive several hours of natural sunlight each day. South, east, or west windows are preferred. Gloxinias and African violets can be kept in bright light without receiving direct sunshine. Plants often receive poor light in the best display location. It is helpful to keep them in an optimum growing location whenever they are not on display.

TEMPERATURE

Most homes are warmer than is desirable for plants. Cool temperatures will lengthen the blooming period. Temperature requirements for plants vary. However, temperatures of 55 to 65° F at night and 65 to 70° F during the day are best for most plants.

WATER

Plants in a home should be watered regularly so the soil moisture level stays uniform. Actively growing and blooming plants that are in small pots may require daily watering. All plants should be watered before they wilt. It is helpful to estimate moisture content by comparing the weight of a well-watered pot to a dry one. The best way is to simply feel the top of the growing medium. If it is dry, water the plant. Keep a saucer under the pot to catch extra water. Always discard the water collected in the saucer so the plant is not sitting in it for any length of time.

HUMIDITY

The humidity of air in a home is usually much lower than in a greenhouse. Potted plants need high humidity to grow well or even survive. It is often necessary to raise the humidity by misting the leaves of plants, by placing them in groups, or by setting them on moist gravel in trays. A mist spray may leave an unsightly gray salt deposit on the leaves after it has dried. These salts can burn leaf tissue if allowed to build up over time. Any salt coating should be removed occasionally by washing with plain or distilled water. Setting plants

outside in the rain on a warm summer day is a good way to wash the leaves and also leach salts out of the growing medium. The overall humidity of home air may also be raised by other means. Do not allow pots to stand in water in an attempt to raise humidity.

FERTILIZER

Most flowering potted plants will not need fertilizer when they are received. They should be fertilized after they have been on display for about two weeks. Use a soluble houseplant fertilizer containing nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium at the recommended rate on the label. This should be repeated every two to four weeks while plants are on display in a home.

GENERAL CARE

Many potted plants are sold with a foil wrapping around the pot. This foil should be removed. If it is not removed, make several holes in the bottom of the foil to allow rapid drainage of water. Never allow a potted plant to stand more than a few minutes in a saucer of water. Complete removal of standing water is important to prevent root rot. Use room-temperature water whenever possible. It is often best to take plants to a sink for watering. Water them thoroughly and allow them to drain for 20 to 30 minutes before returning them to their display or growing location. Do not use water softened for household use. City water is satisfactory. Enough water should be applied at each watering to allow one-quarter of the volume of a pot to run through and away. This helps avoid the buildup of too much salt in the soil.

A plant growing near a window will need to be turned once a week to give good light exposure to all sides. This keeps the plant from growing toward the light and becoming one-sided. Artificial light can be helpful in prolonging the period of best appearance. Fluorescent lights are adequate.

Remove flowers as they fade to prolong the life of the remaining blooms. Keep plants away from either hot or cold drafts. Locations near doors and heat outlets are especially damaging. Plants near windows in the winter may be frosted on cold nights, especially if the leaves touch the glass. Most plants, when received from a greenhouse, should be free from insects. Observe plants carefully for the first few days when they are brought into a home. The foliage can be washed in the sink to minimize insect problems.



CARE AFTER BLOOM

When the flowers fade, most plants should be discarded because they generally don't make good houseplants. However, some types can be kept alive in a home and may bloom again. The following sections give directions for the care of several plants after they bloom and some suggestions for bringing them into bloom again.

HARDY BULBS

Hardy bulbs such as tulips, crocuses, and daffodils should be kept growing as long as possible. One application of a soluble houseplant fertilizer should be made after the blossoms die. When the leaves mature and wither, the bulbs should be stored in a cool, dry place until their fall planting season when they can be planted outdoors. The following year, blooming may be poor but should improve over time. At planting, incorporate a slow-release fertilizer in the bottom of a planting hole. Mix it in with soil but do not set a bulb directly on fertilizer as it may burn tender new roots.



EASTER LILIES

Easter lilies are started in greenhouses, usually in December. They are in peak condition and are ready for sale by Palm Sunday. Many greenhouses in the Rocky Mountain region grow Easter lilies and other flowering potted crops, and most retailers should be able to point out regionally grown plants.

At home, place Easter lilies in a bright area away from drafts and heat sources and keep the soil moderately moist. Remember to discard extra water from saucers because lily roots shouldn't be waterlogged. Removing the orange/yellow pollen sacs from the flowers keeps them from discoloring their pure white petals or family heirloom linens. If well cared for, Easter lilies will bloom for 10 to 14 days.

After Easter, lilies can be planted outside. Until the danger of frost has passed, continue to care for the plants indoors, as described above, and remove the flowers from the stems when they die. After frost danger has passed, plant the lilies outdoors in a sheltered, partly shady spot. A lily will not bloom again the same year it is planted because it needs 1,000 hours of cold for the flower buds to form again. As autumn approaches, cut the foliage back. If the winter weather is not too harsh and the soil around the bulb is kept moist, a lily should sprout again the next spring, complete with flower buds.

Be aware that certain lilies may cause renal failure in cats. Check this Web site for further information: www.aboutflowers.com/gandb/lily.html.

Bulbs may not survive the winter in locations with severe weather. In such a case, they should be dug up in the fall and placed with moist peat moss in a container that holds in moisture. Keep the bulbs in a refrigerator (40°F) until spring. Gardeners can try to force the bulbs indoors or replant them outside after frost has passed.

HYDRANGEAS

Hydrangeas should be cut back to a height of three to four inches in the spring. They also require a cold period in the fall to develop flower buds. Light is not required during a cold treatment period of 40° F for six weeks in November and December. After the cold treatment, grow the plants at a temperature of 55 to 60° F in high light. They will often bloom for Easter.



AZALEAS

Azaleas can be kept growing in the spring and summer with frequent watering. They should be grown at about 60° F. Pinch the new growth occasionally to keep the plants bushy and compact. In the fall, azaleas need about two months at 45° F to ripen their flower buds. Grow plants at 45° F until the buds are starting to swell and then move to a 60° F temperature for blooming. Azaleas should be repotted in the fall in pure peat moss. They require an acid soil, acid fertilizer, and constant moisture. Never allow them to dry out.

AMARYLLIS

Tender amaryllis bulbs can be reflowered annually for many years. Remove the faded flowers and keep the leaves growing in full sunlight. Apply a soluble houseplant fertilizer monthly. The plants may be set outside after the danger of frost is past. The leaves will die down in late summer. Stop watering and fertilizing at that time and store the bulbs in their pots at 50° F for three months. About December 1, set the plants in a window and begin watering them. Repotting is not necessary until the bulbs completely fill the pots.





POINSETTIAS

When shopping for a poinsettia or any other of the familiar holiday plants, keep some tips in mind. Look for plants with healthy green foliage. Remember that some cultivars have leaves that are naturally lighter green than other varieties. This doesn't mean a plant is not healthy.

Also, look for the brightly colored poinsettia bracts to be clean and free of spots or bruises. The flowers are small and are in the center of the bracts. The flowers should be visible with small yellow centers. If the flowers have dropped off, the plant is old and won't last long at home.

Check to see if the lower leaves are green and healthy. If lower foliage is yellowing or has dropped off, pick another plant. If possible, check the root system. A healthy root system will be white with few brown areas.

Once a plant has been selected, follow some easy care guidelines:

Put the plant in a protective bag or sleeve before leaving the store. Even short blasts of cold outside air can damage poinsettias and other flowering plants.

Be aware that a poinsettia bought at Thanksgiving probably won't look very good by Christmas. Another one could be purchased in mid-December.

In a home, put a poinsettia in a spot where there is enough natural light to read fine print during the day.

Avoid bruising the plant. Keep it away from high-traffic areas.

Put a saucer or waterproof container under the poinsettia. This will accomplish two things. First, it will protect furniture from water damage. Second, it will allow excess water to drain out of the pot.

When the top of the soil in the container is dry, water the plant thoroughly. After the

water has drained into the saucer, drain the saucer into the sink. If roots are waterlogged, they will rot.

Temperatures should be between 60 and 72° F for a poinsettia to thrive. (All of these tips will work for other flowering plants as well such as Christmas cactus, kalanchoes, and chrysanthemums.)

One more item needs to be mentioned: *Poinsettias are not poisonous!* Research at The Ohio State University has shown that the poinsettia plant is *not* harmful to human or animal health if parts of the plant are eaten. Check the Society of American Florists About Flowers Web page for information on poinsettia testing at www.aboutflowers.com/gandb/poins.html.

After Christmas, it is possible to try to get a poinsettia to bloom again the next year. This involves first cutting the plant back in spring and again in late summer. Then give the plant at least 14 hours of darkness every night from early October until buds emerge. Better yet, support a local horticulturist by buying another one next year!



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