



## CARE OF HOLIDAY PLANTS

By Joel W. Allen, Extension Educator

If you received a flowering plant for the holidays, it will probably continue to look good for you for a few weeks. However, what happens after that? Some holiday plants such as the Klanchoe, Christmas Pepper, and Jerusalem Cherry should probably be discarded since they are grown for just the holidays and often fail to produce any more fruit or flowers after the initial ones drop off. Also, most of these plants were forced under high light and warm conditions, those we seldom can duplicate at home, so they will most likely soon lose all their leaves, as well.

Many other holiday plants, however, such as the poinsettia, cyclamen, amaryllis, Christmas cactus, and many bulbs, can be kept for some time. The poinsettia and cyclamen should continue to provide color for several months under conditions of lots of light and cool temperatures. Most bulbs after flowering can be moved to a cool dark place for them to rest, to be planted out doors later. The amaryllis, if flowering now, will last for several weeks. Just cut off the spent blooms until all are gone. Eventually cut out the main stem to the top of the bulb, leaving the large green leaves in tact. You can leave the plant in a sunny window or move it to a cooler location with lots of light. You need to allow the leaves to continue to flourish well into spring. These are putting food back into the bulb for next year's flowering.

The poinsettia today is bred so that it will retain its colored bracts (not true flowers) well into the late winter. I've had home gardeners indicate to me that their poinsettia from Christmas still had red leaves in July. While some will retain their colored foliage for months, many of the green leaves will drop off soon, generally due to lower light intensity in our homes. If so, you might choose to cut the plant back in February. It should quickly respond with new green foliage. You then can plant it outdoors in the summer and possibly re-flower next Christmas.

The cyclamen is a bulb. I have seen them flower for many months. Just continue to remove the spent flowers and any withering leaves, by gently twisting and pulling them from the bulb. Do not over water. Of course, you should have removed the foil or plastic wrap soon after all holiday plants were received. This allows for better drainage and allows the soil to dry a bit between waterings. These conditions all add to the longevity of your holiday plant.

Now is a good time to check the other plants you have around the home. Any insect activity that may have come in on the plants you had vacationing outdoors this summer is most likely now beginning to show up. Look for sickly looking plants with yellowing and/or wilting foliage. Also sticky leaves and/or stems showing a black soot-like deposit on them. These are tell-tail signs of various houseplant insects such as aphids, white fly, scale, and spider mite.

While these pest problems may have been present on your houseplants outdoors this summer, generally the high humidity and higher light intensity, even if kept under a shade tree, will allow the plant to flourish and actually tolerate the pest infestation. Only after bringing them in doors, do these pest problems become real serious, again, because our homes tend to be drier and darker, putting the plants to a disadvantage in tolerating the insect pests.

Be sure to examine the upper and lower leaf surfaces and all stems and trunks of houseplants for insect presence. Look for very small white structures which can be the spent skin of the aphid after molting. Reddish-brown, scab-like growths on the stems and lower leaf surfaces could be scale insects. These all suck on the juices or sap of the plant robbing its food and killing is slowly.

If the insect infestation is pretty serious, you might decide to discard the plant. If you have caught it early, there are a few different methods one could follow to try and reduce the pest problem. However, it is important to first get the pest identified and we at Cornell Cooperative Extension can help identify these pest problems and then offer some management ideas.

Samples of the affected leaves of the plant showing the symptoms you are concerned about can be brought or mailed to Cornell Cooperative Extension of Columbia County at 479 Route 66, Hudson, NY 12534. Put the leaves in a plastic sealed bag with label as to plant name, your name, address, and phone number. Either drop it off or mail it in. Digital photos of the plant

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and/or pest problem can also be emailed to us at [columbia@cornell.edu](mailto:columbia@cornell.edu). Of course, the very best method for getting an accurate diagnosis is to bring the entire plant to Cornell Cooperative Extension if it will fit in a bag or box. During the winter months, houseplants should not be exposed to below freezing temperatures for very long or you may lose the plant, even though the insect pests may survive. They have a way of protecting themselves from the cold.

If you have some specific questions about your houseplants or submitting samples, feel free to contact us at 518-828-3346 or by email at [columbia@cornell.edu](mailto:columbia@cornell.edu).