Holiday houseplants brighten beyond the season

Source: Rick Durham, extension professor, Department of Horticulture

The colorful plants you enjoy during the holidays can linger beyond the season. If you take care of them, they may become a welcome addition to your houseplant collection.

Traditional Christmas plants, such as poinsettia, holiday cactus, Christmas pepper, kalanchoe, Jerusalem cherry or cyclamen, require a bright, sunny location in the home. Regular thorough watering whenever the soil is dry is also very important. A sunny location and regular watering are enough for these plants throughout December, but they will need more specialized care if you plan for them flower again next year.

In January, decide if you want to keep your holiday plants or discard them.

That decision is easy for Christmas pepper, Jerusalem cherry and chrysanthemum because they will not flower again in the home environment. Holiday cactus, kalanchoe, or cyclamen can remain colorful through February with proper care. You may even keep them as houseplants after February if you provide the correct conditions. Holiday cacti are relatively easy to grow while kalanchoes and cyclamen are more difficult. While poinsettias may continue to grow, they are very difficult to bring into flower for the next holiday season and are best discarded.

The major result of yearlong care of a holiday plant is its increase in size. It is not an easy task to produce a poinsettia with blooms for the holidays next year, but if you are successful, you may have very large plants with 40 to 50 flowers from the same plant that had only six to eight flowers the previous year. Holiday cacti will be two to five times as large next year with many flowers. Kalanchoe will also increase in size while cyclamen tend to stay compact.

For this season’s poinsettias, choose plants with small, tightly clustered yellow buds in the center of the colorful leaf-like bracts that are commonly referred to as the flowers. Look for crisp, undamaged foliage. Water the plant when it feels dry and discard excess water in the saucer under the plant. Place the plant in a bright, naturally lit location with some direct sunlight. Keep the plant out of drafty areas and away from appliances that produce heat. After a few weeks, apply houseplant fertilizer according to the label directions. The colorful bracts may stay nice into January and February.

Some people may want to try to rebloom poinsettias for the following holiday season. While this is difficult, here are some step-by-step instructions for those who are brave enough to try. Around St. Patrick’s Day, remove faded flowers, bracts and dried leaves from the plant; add more soil if the level in the pot seems low, and fertilize again. Move the plant to the brightest window in your house, full sun is fine if you gradually allow the plant to adjust to higher light.

Around Mother’s Day, your plant could be approaching 3 feet in height. Trim two to six inches off the branches to promote side branching. Repot in a larger container and move the plant outside to a location that receives full sun for at least six hours each day. Again, gradually introduce the plant to full sun, start off in a shady area. Over a few weeks’ time, gradually move the plant to higher light conditions. Fertilize the plant again in June. Trim your poinsettia again around July 4 and slightly increase the amount of fertilizer. Fertilize weekly August through September.

By Labor Day, the plant could be 3-5 feet tall. Prune it to a height of 18-24 inches. This will be your last chance to reduce the height. Around the first day of fall, Sept. 22, selectively remove the smallest new branches so that only 10-25 stems remain to produce flowers. This is also the time to move the plant indoors. The plant will need about 14 hours of uninterrupted darkness and 10 hours of bright sunlight each day. For example, place the plant in a light-free closet or under a box at 6 p.m. each evening and return it to the sunny window at 8 a.m. the next morning. Or simply place the plant in a little used south facing room, and do not turn the lights on in the room from 6 p.m. to 8 a.m. each day. Any day you forget and accidently turn the lights on will cause a delay in flowering.

Continue to water and apply fertilizer about every two weeks. Rotate the plant each day to give all sides even light. If the window does not get direct sun, you can supplement the daytime light with fluorescent or LED lights but be sure to turn them off by 6 p.m.

Around Halloween, stop the day/night, light/dark treatment and keep the plan in a sunny area. Reduce fertilizer applications. The plant can remain in its usual full sun location as the upper leaves (bracts) turn red, pink or white. During November and December, fertilize every three weeks and water regularly. Next Christmas enjoy your beautiful "new" poinsettia.

For information about extending other holiday plants, visit <https://www.uky.edu/hort/sites/www.uky.edu.hort/files/documents/christmasflowers.pdf>. For more information on horticulture topics, contact your (COUNTY NAME) Extension office.

Educational programs of the Cooperative Extension Service serve all people regardless of economic or social status and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expressions, pregnancy, marital status, genetic information, age, veteran status, or physical or mental disability.

-30-