

Green Garden News

Christmas Plants

Christmas is not far away and this is the time for giving and receiving flowering potted plants. A bright, colorful azalea, Christmas begonia, chrysanthemum or a gaily decorated poinsettia, kalanchoe, or Christmas cactus added to the other decorations in the home give the holiday season a festive air.

These Christmas plants can be enjoyed not only during the holidays but will remain attractive far into January and even February if properly cared for. Care of Christmas plants, whether a colorful cyclamen, a long-lasting kalanchoe or a cheerful Christmas begonia, is easy. Faithful attention will add days and even weeks of life to any of these popular Christmas plants.

Temperature has an important influence on the length of time a flowering house plant will remain attractive. The poinsettia is especially sensitive to chilling, and a prolonged chill will cause it to lose its leaves. The plant should be placed in the coolest part of the room, but not in a cold draft. This means away from radiators and other sources of heat. A temperature of 65 degrees at night is satisfactory but 60 degrees is still better for most of the flowering potted plants. In fact, cyclamen likes a 50 degree night temperature.

The method of watering many times determines the life of a plant. Many people drown their plants by watering at regular intervals, not considering whether the plant needs it. Plant roots need air as well as water, and excessive amounts of water do not allow a place for air in the soil. Overwatering literally smothers the plant roots. Proper watering calls for a little thoughtfulness and often the exercise of restraint. Water should be applied in sufficient quantities to thoroughly soak the soil in the pot and then not until the soil approaches dryness again. Plants should be checked for dryness daily but not watered if the soil is still moist. Remember that most holiday plants have been out of a greenhouse a short period. The difference between a greenhouse environment and a typical indoor room is usually considerable. In the home provide as much natural light as possible. A dark bedroom, hall, entrance foyer, or living room does not have optimum growing conditions. Place your plants where they receive the morning sun. Poor light will cause leaf drop.

Although the humidity in a house is not easily altered, plants will do best in an area of the house where the humidity is the greatest. This is

(Continued on page 6)

Volume 3, Issue 12

December 2005

Inside this issue:

December Garden Tips	2
Gifts For the Gardener	2
Watering House Plants	3
Firewood Pests	4
Upcoming Events	4
Questions & Answers	5

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Employment Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function without regard to race, color, age, handicap or national origin.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA, IFAS, FLORIDA A.&M. UNIVERSITY COOPERATIVE EXTENSION PROGRAM, AND BOARDS OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS COOPERATING

The use of trade names is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product names.

December Garden Tips

Flowers

- There is still time to plant cool season flowers including: carnations, digitalis (foxglove), pansy, petunia, Shasta daisy, snapdragon.
- Prepare sensitive plants for freezes.
- Take a few cuttings from pentas, ixora, heather and other cold-sensitive perennials. These can be rooted, potted and held until spring as “insurance” in case extreme cold kills the parent plant.
- If the area receives cold temperatures and plants freeze, do not prune out damaged wood until spring.

Trees and Shrubs

- Last call for planting bare-root trees and shrubs
- Resist the urge to fertilize outdoor trees or shrubs.
- Collect and stick hardwood cuttings now. Good candidates for rooting by this method include: privet, forsythia, wisteria, honeysuckle, crape myrtle, althea, fig, quince, grape and hibiscus.
- There still is time to apply a spray of horticultural oil to shrubs for the control of overwintering scales and mites. Avoid application during periods when extreme temperatures are expected.
- This is a good time to transplant trees and shrubs.

Fruits and Nuts

- Apply a spray of horticultural oil emulsion to dormant fruit trees.
- Harvest pecans early in order to insure good quality. Nut quality decreases rapidly if they are allowed to lie on wet ground for several days. Store them in a clean, dry place.
- Locate or order fruit trees for planting this winter.
- Remove sucker growth below the graft of citrus.

Vegetables

- Vegetables that can be established this month include beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, Chinese cabbage, kale, kohlrabi, leek, mustard, onions, parsley and radish.
- Locate sources for Irish potato and English pea seed. They can be started early in the year.

Lawns

- Begin mowing the “over seeded” lawn as soon as it is tall enough to be clipped.
- Check soil moisture during the winter and water as needed.

Gifts For the Gardener

Another holiday shopping season is upon us, bringing the age-old dilemma of deciding what to buy that special someone who loves gardening. What do you get the gardener who has everything? Let's look at a few possibilities and some tried-and-true suggestions.

The easiest thing that comes to mind is a nice gift card to the local garden center. Every gardener will be buying seeds and fertilizer for the spring crop, so a gift card might come in handy. There are tools that need replacing, too, and maybe a few other necessities and gadgets they can choose from.

Does your gardener use compost? A plethora of composting aids is available, from simple wire mesh bins to polyurethane compost tumblers made from recycled plastic. There are collapsible bins, food

composting containers, biodegradable composting bags, compost thermometers, choppers, turners and even books on how to do it.

Consider a rain barrel to collect natural irrigation water, a garden cart for transport or maybe some hand lotion for the end of the day.

For the more technically advanced, electronic meters help monitor soil pH, moisture and fertility. For under \$40, you can equip your favorite gardener to quickly determine whether more lime or maybe some irrigation is needed.

Speaking of irrigation, how about a new garden hose or sprinkler? Kits are available for under \$100 to set up drip irrigation in the garden. Drip irrigation is more efficient. It helps reduce diseases by keeping the foliage dry while providing moisture right at the soil surface. Happy Holidays!!!

Watering House Plants

More house plants are killed from improper watering than from any other single cause. When plants are overwatered, the soil remains saturated and root systems are unable to function properly because of lack of oxygen in the soil. Soil-borne bacteria and fungi invade the roots and eventually destroy the entire root system. The plant may struggle for months before it succumbs. Plants which do not receive enough water become stunted and woody, the leaves turn yellow and finally fall.

Watering frequency depends on the kind and size of pot, soil mix, environmental conditions and plant species, size and stage of growth. Plants in porous clay pots require more frequent watering than those in nonporous ceramic, metal, glass or plastic pots. Plants grown in small pots will require water more frequently than those in large pots. Soil mixes high in organic materials such as peat retain more water and plants grown in these mixes will not have to be watered as frequently as plants grown in mixes containing high amounts of sand or perlite. High temperature and low humidity will increase the rate of water loss from a plant and, consequently, increases the frequency of watering.

Generally, plants should be watered when the soil becomes dry to the touch. However, some plants, such as ferns, need to be watered before the soil becomes dry to the touch, while cacti and other succulents should remain dry for a few days between waterings. When watering is needed, water thoroughly. Apply enough lukewarm (room temperature) water until it runs out of the bottom of the pot. This type of watering washes excess salts out of the pot and guarantees that the bottom two-

thirds of the pot is properly watered. Be certain that the potting soil drains well, and never allow plants to sit in a saucer of water.

Application of water to the top of the soil mix is the most common method of watering container plants. However, watering from the bottom of the container with the use of a saucer or tray is a method used by many homeowners. Watering constantly from below brings nutrient salts to the soil surface. An excess of these salts may accumulate in the upper soil layer in four to six weeks and this can result in burning of the upper roots and/or stem. It is a good practice, therefore, to water thoroughly from the top once a month to leach excess salts out of the pot.



Containers without drainage holes should have a layer of coarse gravel placed in the bottom to allow a space for excess water. Another method of using containers without drainage is the "double-potting" technique. Pot the plant in a container that has a drainage hole and is one inch less in diameter and shorter than the container without drainage (decorative pot). Place several inches of

gravel in the bottom of the decorative pot and place the potted plant on the gravel layer.

Aggregates such as gravel or pieces of broken clay pot should not be placed in the bottom of a pot with a drainage hole. Research has shown that aggregate actually slows water movement through a pot rather than aiding it. A small piece of broken clay pot can be placed over the drainage hole to prevent soil from draining through the hole.

—by Dr. Bob Black, Retired Consumer Horticultural Specialist, UF/IFAS

Firewood Pests

Cool weather this time of the year brings on thoughts of having a fire in the fireplace or wood stove. Firewood brought into the home, garage or moved onto the porch can be a source of unwanted pests. Most pests living in firewood pose no threat to people, furniture, or to the structure. Nonetheless, homeowners often become concerned when insects emerge from wood that is brought indoors and crawl or fly about the house.

Several types of pests may be found living in firewood.

Termites, wood boring beetles and carpenter ants often tunnel and feed within firewood logs, but upon emergence, usually will not infest structural wood or furniture inside the home. Other kinds of pests simply hide or overwinter beneath the bark. Examples include centipedes, ground beetles, stink bugs, pillbugs, spiders, scorpions and wood cockroaches. Typically, these pests emerge within a few days of the wood being brought indoors. For the most part they are harmless but can be a genuine nuisance.

Firewood pests may be controlled for the most part by management of the firewood itself. Spraying the wood with insecticides is not necessary, effective, nor recommended and could result in harmful vapors when the wood is burned. A much



better approach is to:

1. Store firewood outdoors, only bringing in what you plan to burn immediately or within a few hours. Storing firewood for extended periods inside the home or garage allows pests developing or hiding in the wood to emerge within the home.
2. Position the woodpile away from the house and off the ground. Firewood stacked against the side of a building impedes ventilation and encourages moisture problems. Storing the wood in this manner also provides a direct, hidden avenue for termites and carpenter ants into the structure.
3. Burn older wood first. This shortens the time during which pest infestations can become established.
4. Shake or knock logs together to dislodge any pests clinging to bark. Don't forget to check bottoms of log carriers, since pests often crawl into these when logs are transported into the home. The occasional insect emerging from firewood can easily be eliminated using a broom or a vacuum cleaner.

—by Richard Sprenkel, UF/IFAS, NFREC, Entomology / Associate Center Director

Upcoming Events

Every Tuesday: Plant Diagnostic Clinic. This free clinic is open to the public from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm on Tuesdays at the South Santa Rosa Service Center at 5819 Gulf Breeze Pkwy. If you are having problems with your lawn or plants, bring in a sample and an Extension Horticulturist or Master Gardener will be available to discuss your gardening questions. For more information about what type of sample to bring visit our website at <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension/horticulture/diagnostics.html>.

December 10 & 11, 2005. Pensacola Camellia Club 67th Annual. First Methodist Church, The Wright Place, 80 E. Wright St., Pensacola. Details: Carl Brady, 453-6656 or Judge Roger Vinson, 850-435-8444.

December 23 & 26, 2005: Extension Office

For persons with disabilities requiring special accommodations, please contact the SRC Extension Office at least 5 working days prior to the program so that proper consideration may be given to the request.
(850) 623-3868

Questions and Answers

Q: I just went out to look at my camellia and noticed that it has several leaves that are thick and swollen. They are light green compared to the other leaves and look like they have been scalded. My neighbor says I have to cut the plant down. What do you think?

A: I think your problem is nothing to worry about. Your camellia leaves have a fungus called camellia leaf gall. I'm sure the leaves are swollen and engorged like grotesque malformations on your plant. In fact, fungal leaf gall is a common disease of camellias, azaleas, and rhododendrons. Its appearance is quite startling on any plant: The leaf swells to five times its normal thickness, seeming ready to explode. The leaf color will change to greenish-gray or almost white over a few weeks. Fortunately, this disease spreads very slowly and may not occur every year. No fungicide is recommended for control. The best control method: Hand-pick and dispose of the galls BEFORE they turn white and dispense more fungus spores.

Q: I want to know what to do with Hibiscus plants this winter. I lost one last year and we planted some new ones and I want to know how to save them for next spring.

A: If it is a tropical hibiscus, it might not make it through the winter. If it is a hardy hibiscus, it will probably come back next year.

The first thing you need to know is which type of hibiscus you have. Unfortunately, garden centers, nurseries and home improvement centers lump all hibiscus together.

If your hibiscus has glossy deep green leaves, 3-6" flowers of red, pink, orange, yellow, double or single flowers, it is probably a TROPICAL hibiscus. While many common garden varieties have the 3-6" blooms, many of the hybrid varieties of tropical hibiscus can have blooms around 10" in diameter under ideal conditions.

Another way to check is if the flowers are salmon, peach, orange, or yellow, or double flowered, then you probably have a TROPICAL hibiscus. Hardy hibiscus do not come in these colors or

in doubles! Many tropical hibiscus flowers have more than one color in a bloom either in bands or as spots.

If your hibiscus has dull medium green heart shaped leaves, dinner plate sized white, pink or red flowers with HUGE, bomb shaped buds (2-4" in length!), it is a perennial, hardy hibiscus.

Hardy hibiscus need very little care over the winter, they are root hardy to about zone 5 with no protection. They die to the ground each year.

If you have a tropical hibiscus, remember it is a TROPICAL. They will not tolerate more than a night or two of light freezes. Even one hard freeze (below 25) could kill the plant. These plants are native to sunny, warm and usually humid tropical places.

They detest cold, rainy weather and cold, wet soil. They will not reliably survive outdoors north of zone 9. Santa Rosa County is zone 8. In all other areas, it may be a good idea to bring them indoors BEFORE temps regularly drop below 40-45 F at night to avoid any damage.

Treating your tropical hibiscus correctly will give you years of enjoyment. But remember, they are not immortal! Some are spent after 4 or 5 years in a pot and should be tossed away at this point. Try some of the many and never ending new hybrids being developed.

Q: Can mustard and turnips be planted at any time during the winter?

A: Mustard can be planted from September through May, while the recommended planting dates for turnips are January through April and August through October. Both prefer cool weather and short days.

Q: I recently planted a bed of snapdragons. Will they need protection this winter?

A: No, snapdragons are cold hardy in our area. They usually thrive during the winter and begin flowering in late winter and early spring. Keep them watered and fertilize lightly every four to six weeks.

Christmas Plants

(Continued from page 1)

usually in the cooking area. It often helps if plants are set on pebble-filled saucers with water maintained



at a level just below the base of the pot so that it does not touch the water.

By giving your Christmas plants the best environmental conditions of proper temperature, adequate water, and good light, they will furnish an attractive display for a longer time.

—by Dr. Bob Black, Retired Consumer Horticultural Specialist, UF/IFAS



Santa Rosa County Extension Service

6263 Dogwood Drive
Milton, FL. 32570-3500

Newsletter compiled by:

Theresa Friday
Extension Agent I
Environmental Horticulture
Phone: 850-623-3868
E-mail: theresaf@co.santa-rosa.fl.us
Website: <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension/horticulture/index.html>

**SANTA ROSA COUNTY EXTENSION SERVICE
6263 DOGWOOD DRIVE
MILTON, FL 32570-3500**

NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION
US POSTAGE PAID
MILTON, FL
PERMIT NO. 68