

New Year, New Plants: How to Care for Holiday Florae Year-Round

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The holidays have come and gone, but now you're left wondering what to do with the gifted and ornamental plants of the season.

Poinsettias and Christmas cactuses are commonly bought and shared through November and December, but according to **Parker Filer**, assistant agent in horticulture for University of Arizona [Cooperative Extension](#) ^[1], you can extend the lives of these florae through the new year.

Oh, Cuetlaxochitl

Native to Mexico, Cuetlaxochitl (pronounced ket-la-sho-she and known commonly as the [poinsettia](#) ^[2]) was used by the Mexica people for purple dye and medicine, and as a symbol of sacrifice. The plant's English namesake is Joel Roberts Poinsett, the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico, who introduced it to the U.S. in 1825, according to Colorado State University Extension.

Cuetlaxochitl, which in the wild can grow as large as a small tree, became associated with Christmas when the Catholics who colonized Mexico created their own lore, which told of the green leaves miraculously turning red around Christmastime.

What are commonly thought to be red petals are actually modified leaves, called bracts, Filer said. The flowers are the small, yellow buds at the center.

With proper care, it's possible to coax red bracts from your plant annually.

"In terms of watering," Filer said, "you want the soil wet but not saturated. Give them a drench but then allow the soil surface to dry between waterings. Never leave the poinsettia in standing water."

Keep the plant between 60 and 70 degrees and continue watering routinely through March. In April, let the soil dry a little and allow more time between watering. If branches become spindly, prune them back to 8 inches, and repot the plant in a larger container with sterile or soilless potting mix. Through summer, continue watering and gradually increase the amount of direct sunlight. Prune as necessary and fertilize once a month with an all-purpose indoor plant fertilizer.

To get your Cuetlaxochitl to bloom again in time for the holidays, store it in complete darkness (try a closet or box) for about 12 hours daily from October through mid-to-late November. Reduce water and fertilizer at this point and prepare for your miracle.

Rockin' Around the Christmas Cactus

Christmas cactuses are a traditional – though less common – gift to give and receive during the Christmas season. But the plant can be a vibrant addition to your succulent collection year-round. A well-cared-for Christmas cactus can live for more than 50 years and can grow to over 3 feet across, according to Filer.

"If you think about the plant in terms of its ecological origins, it will help you better care for it," he said.

Christmas cactus is a tropical succulent, native to the rainforests of Brazil. As epiphytes, they live and grow among the branches of large trees, high in the shady canopy, Filer said. For this reason, they prefer indirect sunlight, humid air, stable temperatures and light water.

The plants were dubbed Christmas cactus because they bloom in red, white and other vibrant colors in winter.

Filer, who is caring for a Christmas cactus of his own, suggests filling a plate or other shallow container with water and pebbles and placing your succulent pot atop the pebbles to provide a humid environment for the plant.

You don't have to repot often, as these plants prefer to be root-bound, he said. But do repot every two to three years into open, airy soil. In summer, the cactus will thrive on a shaded patio with regular watering. Move it inside next to a sunny window by autumn.

"Christmas cactuses are 'short day' plants, meaning that they require longer periods of darkness in the fall – at least 12 to 14 hours per night for six to eight weeks – in order to initiate flowering. But after the holidays, you can dial back the close care and attention to lighting," Filer said.

Like poinsettias, Christmas cactus lore centers around a Christmastime bloom. However, there are other varieties of the plant that bloom during different times of year and it's likely that you have one of these varieties instead of a true

Christmas cactus.

Here's how to tell: The Thanksgiving cactus blooms around November and has pointed ridges along its pads. The Easter cactus, which blooms in the spring, has pad ridges that are scalloped. The Christmas cactus, on the other hand, looks like a combination of the two, boasting teardrop-shaped ridges.

In short: Don't leave these plants behind! Instead, repot your holiday cheer in the new year.

Everyone here at LQP is rooting for you!

The Pima County Master Gardeners Program [3] hosts workshops, seminars and library talks. Gardening advice is also available Monday through Friday via phone, email and in-person.

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[1] <https://extension.arizona.edu/> [2] <https://www.apsnet.org/edcenter/apsnetfeatures/Pages/PoinsettiaFlower.aspx> [3] <https://extension.arizona.edu/pima-master-gardeners>