

# Alternative Holiday Plants

There are many other flowering plants besides poinsettias available in florist shops, supermarkets, garden centers, and greenhouses during the holidays. By carefully selecting and properly caring for these plants, you can ensure color throughout the holidays.

Amaryllis can be purchased at any stage in its development -- from a single bulb all the way to the "puffy bud" stage. Make sure one third of the bulb (the "nose") is above the soil line; place it in a sunny, warm location and watch the leaves and flower stem elongate. No fertilizer is necessary until after flowering, and the medium should be kept on the dry side -- avoid waterlogging. Temperatures should be above 60F for this tropical plant, and high light intensities will help ensure the leaves and flower stem do not stretch and topple over. An average of 4 weeks is required from planting the bulb to the first open flower. When you see the flower buds begin to swell and turn color, another day or two will result in open flowers.

Gloxinias, close relatives of African violets, are low-growing, spreading plants with large, fleshy leaves and small, trumpet-shaped flowers. A high-quality plant will have at least three to five open flowers and at least that many more buds showing in the center of the plant. Properly produced and marketed at the right time, a 6-inch gloxinia will have a dozen or more buds and will continue to flower for 3 to 4 weeks, if properly cared for. In general, gloxinias should be treated as African violets -- avoid high-intensity, direct sunlight; water from the saucer with warm (at least 70F) water; keep on the moist side but not waterlogged; and avoid cold or hot drafts. If allowed to wilt or if placed in too dark a location, most of the buds may fall off.

Perhaps the most durable of the red-flowering potted plants available this time of year are the kalanchoe. There is a close relationship between the kalanchoe and the common jade plant -- thick, firm, fleshy leaves. However, the kalanchoe's leaves are more flattened and tightly packed. They like it warm and dry; if you tend to forget to water your plants, this is the best candidate, though drought stress will tend to promote shorter flower life. When buying a kalanchoe, look for lots of color and little or no dead flowers.

Christmas cacti are another alternative. The Christmas cacti have flattened leaves with rounded teeth on the margins as opposed to the Thanksgiving cactus that has pointed teeth. Easter cacti have pointed teeth with fibrous hairs in the leaf joints. Under normal conditions the holiday cacti will bloom close to the holiday suggested in its name. Florists will often force plants into bloom at other times. Most of the Christmas cactus sold are actually Thanksgiving cactus and will bloom in subsequent years at Thanksgiving time.

Holiday cacti are quite easy to care for if you understand the basics. When the plants are in flower, they should be kept in bright, indirect light. Too much light can cause the flower color to fade or the heat may cause the flower buds to drop. Day temperatures of 70°F and evening temperatures of 60-65°F are considered ideal. Be sure to water thoroughly, but let plant dry slightly between waterings. Christmas cactus is not as drought tolerant as the name suggests. The leaves will wrinkle if the soil is dry and they lack water. It is especially important not to let them dry too much during flowering or they may drop the flower buds. Holiday cacti are short day plants meaning they bloom when nights are at least 15 hours long. Holiday cacti will also flower if exposed to prolonged cool temperatures between 50-55°F. No flowers will form at night temperatures above 70 degrees.

If the person you are purchasing a gift for is a garden person some other suggestions are gift certificates to purchase plants or garden supplies when they will need them for their garden. Gardeners are always in need of a variety of tools and garden items so you may want to check out garden centers

or catalogs to find out what the latest thing for gardeners is. There always seems to be something new. Garden magazines might be another possibility. That way the person you give a subscription to will think of you throughout the year when they receive their magazines.

### **2010 Future Harvest - CASA Annual Conference**

2010 Future Harvest - CASA Annual Conference will be held January 15 & 16, at the National Conservation Training Center (NCTC) in Shepherdstown, WV. The Conference Schedule & Registration is now online at <http://www.futureharvestcasa.org/>

Please Note: You must PRE-REGISTER for the conference this year due to NCTC being a federal facility. The deadline to register if you are staying overnight is December 15. Commuter deadline is January 4. There will be NO at-the-door registration this year.

### **2009 Pesticide Recertification Program**

If you missed our Pesticide Recertification training on December 2, 2009 you still have time to get recertified. Give Bill Bennett or Carla Wiley a call at the Farm Service Agency (304-263-7547) for more information on how you can still get credits until December 31, 2009.

### **Pennsylvania Farm Show 2010**

The Pennsylvania Farm Show will run from January 9-16, 2010 at the Farm Show building in Harrisburg, PA. For more information on the Farm Show schedule go to their website at <http://www.farmshow.state.pa.us/>

### **Farming for the Future Conference**

The Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) will hold their 2010 Farming for the Future Conference February 4 – 6, 2010 at the Penn Stater Conference Center in State College, PA. The 2010 Theme is The Sustainable Challenge: Providing for a Livable Tomorrow. For more information on the conference go to <http://www.pasafarming.org/conference2010>

### **2010 Ag Ed Dinner Meetings**

The 2010 Agricultural Education Dinner Meetings will be held January 14, February 11, and March 11 at 6:30 p.m. The January and March meetings will be at the Berkeley County Youth Fairgrounds. The February 11, 2010 meeting will be held at James Rumsey Technical Institute in Hedgesville. Dinner for all meetings will start at 6:30 with the educational program to follow. Please call 264-1936 to make a reservation for the meal one week prior to each date. There is no charge for the meal if we receive your reservation by noon the Wednesday a week before the meeting is to be held. Mark those dates on your calendar and plan on having a home cooked meal at the Berkeley County Youth Fair in January and March and at James Rumsey in February. Receive education on the following topics: Persistent BVD; Value Added; and Grazing. We have also applied for Pesticide Recertification Credits for the dinner meeting programs. I will have more information on our January meeting in a future column. See you at the dinner meetings.

### **Garden Tips**

- Watch for seed catalogs and start planning your 2010 garden
- Remember to water your holiday tree and other live plants
- If you purchased a live (balled and burlapped or potted) Christmas tree you should plant it as soon after the holiday as possible to help it survive

*Just received word that the West Virginia University Garden calendars will not be available until after the New Year. We will let you know when they become available locally. Until next time ... Until next time ...Happy Holidays, Gardening, and Farming!*