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Christmas Cheer and Beautiful Blooms

‘Tis the Season! Now’s the time for flowers in December. One might ask: How and why are there blooming plants at the start of winter? The why is simple: people love flowers! The how needs a little more explanation.

The three big hitters of winter blooms are amaryllis, Christmas cactus, and, of course, poinsettia. They all have some interesting habits and care instructions.

Holiday cacti, in the genus Schlumbergera, put on flowers around the holidays and the dark season. Three types exist: Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter cacti. Thanksgiving cacti tend to have sharper points on their leaves, also known as cladodes, while Easter cacti have rounded bumps around the edge. Blooms are triggered by short daylight periods

Amaryllis bulbs are actually a type of plant called Hippeastrum, not true Amaryllis, but they are in the same family. They’re related to resurrection or surprise lilies and have similar habits. Early flowers emerge with leaves to follow. If you buy a bulb from a store and want to keep it, make sure to snip the fading flower heads and let it produce leaves. With plenty of light and proper moisture, it will grow, go dormant, and then be ready to flower again next year.

The long-standing star of holiday flowers is, of course, the poinsettia. For such a popular plant, it’s often treated like a disposable decoration. Poinsettias are a species of Euphorbia native to Mexico. That makes it very incongruent with a Kansas December. It also suffers from the usual stresses of houseplants until it can be taken outside for the summer.

The best care a poinsettia can receive in the next few months is avoiding overwatering and drafts or heater vents. Once the plant begins to color up, it is on track for dormancy. The flower of the plant is the small green and yellowish bud in the middle, while the color comes from the bracts. The flowers and bracts eventually fade, and the plant turns into a stick.

At this point, the stick is either deemed unsightly and trashed or the plant is allowed to sit dormant for a few months. When sunlight increases, buds will begin to form. This is also the time to start watering again. Poinsettias prefer heat, so they should be moved outside around May.

Eventually, poinsettias can rebloom. However, the long dark periods often coincide with frost

and freezes. Bringing the plant back indoors and giving it around 16-18 hours of darkness will initiate flower development.

Even though they are sold as decorations, holiday flowers don't have to be thrown away after Christmas! With proper care, that 'amaryllis' or poinsettia can be a staple in the home. Happy Houseplants and Happy Holidays!

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