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Don't Toss that Poinsettia: Try a Little After-Holiday Care

BY KENNETH JOHNSON

Poinsettias are not only the most popular plant grown during the holiday season, but also the bestselling potted plant overall in the United States and Canada. There are over 100 different varieties of poinsettias. In addition to the traditional red, poinsettias can be found in a wide variety of colors including pink, white, yellow, purple, and salmon.

The large colored parts commonly thought to be the "flowers" of poinsettias are actually modified leaves called bracts. The greenish-yellow flowers (cyathia) are clustered at the center of the bracts. Poinsettias drop their bracts and leaves once their flowers have shed all of their pollen.

If properly cared for, poinsettias can retain their color for several months, but as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end. While most people dispose of poinsettias after they finish blooming, with a little effort it is possible to get a poinsettia to bloom again next year.

Once about half of the leaves and bracts have dropped, start to decrease watering until the soil is completely dry. This will cause the plant to go dormant. Store the dormant plant in a cool, dark location, watering only enough to prevent the stems from shriveling. Once new growth begins, usually in early May, cut the plant to within 4 to 6 inches of the soil; this will help encourage new growth. If you wish to repot the plant, now is the time to do that as well. Place the plant in a sunny window and treat it like any other houseplant, watering when dry and fertilizing occasionally with a dilute fertilizer.

Once the danger of frost has passed and nighttime temperatures remain above 50 degrees F, move your poinsettia outdoors, exposing it to direct sun gradually over a week or two to allow it to acclimate to the outdoors. Then dig a hole big enough to hold the pot in an area that receives 6 to 8 hours of direct sunlight, with some shade in the afternoon. Turn the pot occasionally to prevent

your poinsettia from rooting through the bottom holes. If you can't put the poinsettia pot in the ground, you may need to water the plant more frequently. To keep your poinsettia from getting too leggy, pinch off the shoot tips, choosing tips with two or three fully expanded leaves below them. Do this every three or four weeks until mid-August to keep the plant compact and bushy. Remember to water your poinsettia regularly, and fertilize it every couple of weeks.

When night temperatures get down to 55 to 60 degrees F, it's time to bring your poinsettia back inside and place it in a sunny window. Poinsettias are short-day plants, meaning they grow vegetatively during times where there are long days and produce flowers when exposed to short days - or, more specifically, to long nights. For your plant to rebloom in time for Christmas, it needs to be in complete darkness from 5 pm to 8 am from about the end of September until the bracts develop good color, usually in early or mid-December. To provide darkness, place the plant in a closet or cover it with a box. During the day, put it back in the sunny window. Keep up this routine until the bracts are almost fully expanded. Try to make sure the plant doesn't experience temperatures below 60 or above 70 degrees F. Nighttime temperatures above 70 to 75 degrees F may delay or prevent flowering.

Love poinsettias? With a little attention, you can keep yours going for years to come.





If you are a plant lover, you are bound to take to growing tillandsia this holiday season. In fact, even if you describe yourself as having a brown thumb and being allergic to soil, you will find the strappy tillandsia to be very easy to grow. With their different sizes, textures, and colors, you are sure to find one to fit your holiday décor.

Tillandsia are epiphytes – "air plants" – that use their minimal root systems to attach themselves to trees and rocks and absorb needed moisture and nutrients through their leaves, much like spanish moss does. They absorb water and nutrients through small scales on their leaves, which give the plants their unique silver or gray appearance.

Tillandsia have become popular as houseplants and generally are easy to care for. They enjoy indirect sun within the home or a shadier location if placed outside. Watering is the most critical aspect of their care. Debbie Black of the University of Illinois Plant Biology Greenhouse and Conservatory recommends watering tillandsia once a week using the "submerge" method: Submerge the entire plant for 30 minutes to an hour (if the leaves look shriveled and feel dry, increase the time to a couple of hours). Soak in a bowl. Allow to dry a couple of hours before putting back on display. Misting can be done once or twice a week.

Tillandsias do bloom, usually for several months each year – a lack of blooming may be an indication of insufficient light. The showy flowers are long and tubular to funnel shaped. Colors range from white to bold orange, red, purple, and pink, and individual blossoms quickly fade away.

There are two main types of tillandsias: gray and green. Both are native to tropical forests, but the gray types grow where long droughts are common. Their gray leaves reflect sunlight and conserve moisture; they can be mounted and grown in bright filtered light. Green-leaved tillandsias are native to rainy, humid environments; they grow best with less light and placed inside containers to help keep them moist. Our Illinois winter homes are most appropriate for gray tillandsias.

- *Tillandsia caput-medusae* has silvery twisty leaves, a swollen base, and a red flower stalk.
- *Tillandsia plumosa* boasts silvery leaves and can be grown on rocks or limbs.

• *Tillandsia utriculata* v. *pringleyi* has delicately thin silver leaves, with a flowering stalk that is red to orange or pink, with green.

Many people think air plants resemble a little octopus with its spreading tentacles; they can be displayed in a variety of artistic ways. Why not try one or more of these in your holiday decorating, or as a unique gift this year?

- Create a unique wreath. Using a formed grapevine wreath from a craft store as your base, glue on a variety of tillandsias (either grouped on one part of the wreath for an asymmetrical effect, or spaced throughout). Add small pine cones, colorful mosses, or festive miniature decorations.
- Create a tillandsia landscape inside a lantern, in a square glass vase, or under a cloche. Use moss or aquarium gravel for a base, place tillandsias, and adorn with pinecones, miniature décor, and driftwood.
- · Place tillandsia in wineglasses and line them up along a holiday table.
- Along with colorful moss, place tillandsia in a clear plastic or glass ornament, or glue tillandsia to a wine cork or crystal.



A slice of a tree, a pine cone wrapped in wire, a miniature garden ornament, and reindeer moss combine with multiple tillandsias for an intriguing display. Tillandsia plumosa are the two in the center, with Tillandsia utriculata v. pringley framing the picture at the top. Tillandsia caput-medusae is in the miniature watering can.

Choosing Plants with Winter Interest

BY NANCY KREITH

In our Illinois climate, gardeners can take advantage of the changing seasons with landscape plants that show their true colors in winter. Just as a gardener plans a perennial flower bed based on bloom times, you should think about the year-round characteristics of the landscape by selecting trees, shrubs, grasses, and groundcovers with showy winter features. Many plants will make a fine display, whether through their bright colors, unique branch structure, textured bark, dried seed heads, or persistent berries. When developing a plant list or adding new plants to existing landscapes, consider these choice plants for winter interest.

TREES

For berries: Washington Hawthorn (*Crataegus phaenopyrum*) is a 30-foottall native tree that grows best in full sun and well-drained soil. The reddish berry-like fruits appear in September, persist into spring, and are most showy in late fall to winter, especially in front of evergreens or with snowfall.

For bark: Paperbark Maple (*Acer griseum*) is 20 to 30 feet tall with a 15- to 25-foot spread that grows in full sun to partial shade in moist, well-drained soil. It is outstanding in all seasons but especially noticeable in winter months as the copper-red, cinnamon bark begins to exfoliate in the second year.

For shape: Eastern Redbud *(Cercis canadensis)*, a 20- to 35-foot-tall native understory tree, prefers shade to part shade and rich, moist, well-drained soil. The branch structure is charming, and when the tree is adorned with snow the shape is highlighted nicely. The rusty colored underbark has a nice winter display, and brown fruit pods can persist through winter. Besides these great winter features, this tree has outstanding pink blooms in spring. For even more interest, be on the lookout for cultivars with weeping habits. Eastern Redbud can be relatively short-lived and weak-wooded; keeping up on proper pruning will benefit this species.

SHRUBS

For colorful stems: Redosier Dogwood *(Cornus stolonifera)* is a native shrub that grows 7 to 9 feet tall in full sun to moderate shade and does well in a wide range of soils. The shrub is most effective planted in groups and placed against evergreens or a contrasting backdrop that will highlight its bright red stems. For the best display, regularly perform renewal pruning (removal of the oldest stems to the ground), since new stems have the brightest color.



For shape: Harry Lauder's Walking Stick (*Corylus avellana 'Contorta'*) is an 8- to 10-foot-tall grafted shrub that grows in full sun to part shade and does well in large containers. It can have decent fall color, but it is after leaves fall that its most striking feature – extremely gnarled branches – is exposed. Additionally, in late winter to early spring greenish-yellow blooms (pendulous catkins) appear. This is truly a one-of-a-kind specimen.

For winter blooms: Common Witchhazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*), a 20- to 30-foot-tall native large shrub or small tree, prefers full sun to moderate shade. It is durable, likes its soil moist, and can be used as a specimen tree or for naturalizing. After a beautiful show of yellow fall color, the truly exceptional display comes after the leaves fall, when fragrant, delicate yellow flowers appear in October to December. The petals actually roll up on cold days.

GROUNDCOVERS (evergreen and semi-evergreen)

For color and texture

Russian Cypress (*Microbiota decussate*) is a spreading evergreen groundcover, 12 inches tall with a 12- to 15-foot spread. It performs best in full sun on well-drained soils. In shady areas, the growth is slowed and branching becomes very open. The uniform circular spread and flat-topped branching work well along stairs and banks. The bronze to burgundy foliage that appears in winter looks best in northern climates; foliage can look brown in southern parts of the state and if placed in too much shade.

Allegheny Pachysandra (*Pachysandra procumbens*) is a broadleaf semievergreen groundcover, 6 to 12 inches tall, that is native to North America in parts of the east and southeast. It grows well in partial to full shade and in acidic, moist, well-drained soils. The uniform growth habit adds a green blanket to the winter landscape. It performs best in shaded protected areas and is a nice alternative to the Japanese species. Somewhat showy white to pinkish flowers appear in the spring.

PERENNIALS AND GRASSES

Ornamental grasses and dried seed heads from perennials add wonderful charm to the winter landscape. Left standing through winter, these plants also provide much-needed food for birds and shelter for butterflies and other beneficial insects.

For seed heads:

Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurium*) is a native perennial with daisylike flowers that grows 2 to 4 feet tall, prefers full sun and well-drained soil, and tolerates heat and drought once established. The jet-black seed heads that remain through winter are known for attracting birds, along with adding dimension to the winter landscape. Many cultivars are available, but keep in mind that the straight species will support the most native wildlife.

Northern Sea Oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) is a native grass that grows 2 to 3 feet tall with an upright, arching habit. It prefers fertile, moist, well-drained soils but will tolerate some drought. The flat seed heads turn rusty brown and foliage becomes bronze to add great character to the winter landscape. This plant can be aggressive because of seed heads and rhizomes.

These suggestions are just a few of many landscape plants offering unique winter interest. Before committing to long-term landscape installations, be sure to do your research. Each season, observe how trees and shrubs perform in your region. Along with exploring photos online, consider taking a trip to a local arboretum or conservatory. For trees and shrubs, U of I Extension has two websites for selecting specimens for your home: extension.illinois. edu/treeselector and extension.illinois.edu/shrubselector.

Living with Your Houseplants and Their Insect Relatives

BY RICHARD HENTSCHEL

Everyone invites guests over once in a while; some even stay a few days. But in bringing houseplants indoors for the winter, you've done all you can to avoid bringing along the "insect relations" that often accompany the plants – and that rarely leave.

Even after making your best attempts, you may wake up a few weeks after your houseplants have been inside to see something that is not quite right on the plants, or perhaps is on the window trying to get out. Insects you find may not be closely associated with a houseplant, but simply happened to be on the plant at the time it was brought inside.

If this is the case, the potential for a problem is really low. These hitchhiking insects do not feed on your plants; without food, and in the wrong environment, they cannot survive. Boxelder bugs are a great example. They wander around the home, living for a time on the food they have stored. But they leave behind little black spots of the food they digest, so finding and disposing of them as soon as possible is preferable to doing a cleanup later.

The insects that are troublesome outside are the ones that cause problems inside as well. Outdoors, natural predators help keep populations in check, and weather events like rainstorms help reduce insect numbers. Inside, the offending insects living on the houseplants grow their numbers quickly.

Two of the more common winter houseplant insects are spider mites and scale insects, both of which live aboveground. *Spider mites* come in several colors, but all cause the same feeding damage. Lacking chewing mouthparts, spider mites scratch plant tissue to feed on the sap. Mites can also spread digestive juices in the area where they feed, destroying more tissue for consumption. Mite damage will sneak up on you; insects start out in low numbers, out of sight on the underside of the leaves. As their numbers explode, you will see them by the thousands, in very fine webbing near the vegetative growing points and flower buds. This is an outbreak needing immediate

attention. You can rinse the nymphs and adults off the plants with forceful streams of water, like from the sprayer attachment in the kitchen sink or your bathroom shower head. Repeat the water spray after a few days, as the eggs left behind on the plants will hatch and start the process all over. The goal is to break the life cycle and keep adults from laying any more eggs. If you can do that, you win!

The best evidence that you have *scale insects* is a clear sticky material on the leaves or on the surface below the plant. Scale insects insert their feeding tube into plant tissue. As they remove and feed on the plant sap, they expel the excess, creating that telltale sticky surface. Getting rid of scale insects is a lot more work than eliminating spider mites. While the offspring, a very small, fleshy insect resembling an aphid, can be dislodged just like spider mites, the adult scales are firmly attached to the plant stems, protected by their scales. You may end up resorting to an insecticide labeled for use on houseplants.

Another insect you may find in the pot of a houseplant is *pillbugs* (also called roly polies because they roll up into a ball when disturbed), which love humidity and feed on organic matter. They will remain out of sight until you water the houseplant, temporarily forcing them out of the soil. *Earwigs* are also common in potting soil. A thorough watering will force them out of the pot; be sure to do this somewhere that you can rinse the bugs away so they don't return to the pot.

On occasion there can even be an outbreak of the common *aphid* indoors. Aphids give live birth rather than laying eggs, so a spray bath in the sink or shower usually eliminates them. An added benefit of all that plant rinsing is cleaner, healthier plants. If you receive a holiday gift plant, keep it separate from your other houseplants to avoid the spread of any insects from one to the other.



Orchids Are Elegant Houseplants

BY SANDRA L. MASON

A Mother's Day gift corsage or Tarzan's jungle gift to Jane – most of us have limited experience with orchids. Orchids are the most highly evolved flowers on the earth. Despite their reputation as finicky, orchids are an amazingly diverse plant family growing in deserts, mountains, marshes, northern woods, Illinois forests, and even our homes.

Not all orchids enjoy the temperature and humidity commonly found in homes, so some may require special lighting and humidity control for indoor growing. But if you are looking for an easy-to-grow but elegant houseplant, the moth orchid is a great option.

The *Phalaenopsis* or moth orchids, native to Asian jungles, possess dark, shiny green leaves adorned with showy flowers of pink, white, or yellow. Imagine a flock of fluttering moths dancing on an arching high wire. Intensely blue-colored moth orchids also greet us inside many stores. (However, don't get too attached to the unnatural blue color. These flowers have been dyed, and any future flowers will be white.)

Moth orchids are not only easy to grow but also one of the easiest to encourage to rebloom. 'Sussex Pearl,' 'Femme Fatale,' and 'Southern Ruby' are just some of the 12,000 hybrid "phals" available. The flowers last an amazing two to five months.

Unlike our common houseplants, moth orchids don't live in soil but are epiphytes, so-called air plants. As jungle natives they cling with long, thick roots to rocks and trees. Their moisture is gathered from rain, dew, and humidity and their nutrients from decaying leaves and other debris that accumulates among their roots. The conditions are fairly easy to reproduce by paying attention to light levels and watering practices and using an orchid planting mix.

To successfully grow moth orchids as houseplants, keep these guidelines in mind:

 Orchids require bright light (but no direct sun) to bloom. Too much light will burn the foliage; too little will result in little growth or no blooms. East windows are ideal, where the orchids can enjoy the bright morning sun but cooler night temperatures. A shaded western or southerly window will also work. North windows are not a good choice. Orchids taken outdoors in the summer should be placed in the shade of a tree or patio and moved indoors before the temperature drops below 50 degrees F. Moth orchids can also be grown under fluorescent lights.

Generally moth orchids bloom when night temperatures are about 15 degrees cooler than day temperatures for two weeks. Late summer to early fall is a good time to start the process. Moth orchids bloom at 70 to 80 degrees F during the day and 55 to 65 degrees F at night. Days at 70 degrees paired with 55-degree nights are ideal to induce flowering. Once the small green shoot that will bear the flowers starts to form, be sure to use a small stake and clips to keep the shoot growing tall for maximum flower show.



- Orchids appreciate high humidity between 40 and 85 percent; however, moth orchids are more forgiving than many orchids of the dry air in our winter homes. To raise your humidity, use a humidifier, or fill a tray with pebbles, saturate the pebbles with water, and place the pot on the pebbles. Orchids can also grow well in terrariums.
- Orchids need thorough watering and regular fertilization during their growing season. Orchid fertilizers with higher percentages of calcium and magnesium and an analysis of 15-5-15 are good. Think "weakly weekly" – in other words, use a weak (low) rate of orchid fertilizer in water every week. In a University of Illinois project a good fertilization regime was found to be one-fourth the recommended rate every third watering during spring and summer, and one-fourth the recommended rate every three weeks in fall and winter.
- Don't overwater. Some orchid labels recommend watering with ice cubes. This recommendation works well with gardeners that routinely overwater plants, but ice-cold water would not be typical for a jungle plant. Roomtemperature water is a more desirable practice.
- The potting mix should provide good air penetration and fast water drainage. Commercially prepared orchid mixes are best, generally made of a combination of shredded fir bark, charcoal, and soilless mix. Repot every two to three years, removing only dead roots. Roots will naturally grow outside of the pot and should not be cut off.

Once we understand their basic needs, moth orchids can provide years of elegant enjoyment.



Moth orchids often have multicolored flowers.



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Grow Your Own Birdseed

BY RHONDA FERREE

Feeding and watching birds has become one of America's favorite pastimes. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, nearly half of the households in the United States provide food for wild birds. The birdseed you buy may include a number of different plant-based ingredients.

The most commonly used birdseed is sunflower seeds, with black-oil sunflower seeds being the most popular. The seed's small size and thin shell make it easier for small birds to eat. Striped sunflower seeds are larger and have thicker shells. Sunflowers (*Helianthus* sp.) are easy plants to grow and come in various colors and heights.

All sunflower shells contain allelopathic toxins that prevent other seeds from germinating. This is partly why the ground beneath a feeder filled with sunflower seeds is often bare. If this is a problem, consider feeding sunflower hearts instead. The hearts are expensive, but they include no shells.

Safflower seeds resemble sunflower seeds, but they have a very tough shell that only larger birds can crack. They are the seeds of the annual safflower plant *(Carthamus tinctorius)*, a herbaceous, thistle-like plant also grown commercially to produce vegetable oil.

To attract finches, use a tube-style hanging feeder filled with black nyjer seed. Although sometimes also called thistle or niger, the nyjer seed sold today is not from a thistle at all. Rather, it is from *Guizotia abyssinica*, a daisy-like plant. Nyjer is an annual flower with bright yellow-orange flower heads that turn into seed pods. You can grow your own by starting the seed indoors or planting seed directly in the ground after all danger of frost is gone. Similar to sunflowers, you can harvest the seed or leave the plants for birds to feed on all winter.

Cereal grains – dried whole kernel corn, cracked corn, millet, and milo – may be used alone or as filler in birdseed mixes. Millet and milo are the little round seeds often found in mixes. Millet comes from a Pennisetum plant, while milo is a type of grain sorghum. Both are available as ornamental plants with attractive colored leaves and seeds. Purple Majesty (*Pennisetum glaucum* 'Purple Majesty') is a cultivar of pearl millet with dark purple foliage and stems and stunning purple-brown seeds that are a favorite of many birds. Ornamental sorghums are available in earth-toned seed heads and grow 7 to 12 feet tall.

Like us humans, birds have different food preferences. Hands down, blackoil sunflower seeds are the most popular food among a large variety of birds. Cardinals love safflower. Juncos and sparrows go wild for white proso millet; goldfinches can't resist nyjer seed, and chickadees and titmice will delightfully indulge themselves with peanuts. In a nutshell, the key to successfully attracting birds to your backyard is variety.





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