

# Keep poinsettias looking great through the holidays

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Along with the fragrant evergreens and twinkling lights synonymous with the holiday season, poinsettias make up a key component of holiday decorating.

Unlike holly and some of the other greenery that is commonly associated with the holidays, poinsettias do not naturally thrive in the colder temperatures. These plants originate in southern Mexico and were considered an exotic plant when first introduced to the United States by Joel Robert Poinsett, the first American ambassador to Mexico.

Poinsettias can be fickle plants and ones that gardening novices may find challenging to maintain. The plants are comprised of green foliage, colorful (often red) flower bracts, and the actual flowers of the plants, which are the red or green button-like parts nestled in the center of the bracts.

Because they are a tropical plant, poinsettias can be damaged by exposure to low temperatures, even if they are only exposed for short periods of time. They should be wrapped and protected against the elements when brought home. For maximum plant life, poinsettias need to be placed near a warm, sunny window, or another area that has ample amounts of light. They thrive in temperatures between 60 and 75 degrees and should be kept away from warm or cold drafts.

Water the plant whenever the surface feels dry to the touch. Water until it drains out the bottom, but don't let the plant sit in water. Over- or under-watering can cause leaves to drop prematurely and wilt. If your home lacks in humidity, you may

need to water the plant more frequently. Poinsettias do not need to be fertilized while the plant is in bloom.

The Ohio State University Extension says poinsettias can be reflowered the following Christmas, but unless a yearlong schedule of care is observed, the results usually are not good. You can speak with a gardening expert or consult online resources for the proper care schedule. Caring for a poinsettia year-round involves gradually drying out the plant and storing it in a cool location. The plant later will be moved outdoors and then back inside and pruned to keep a full shape.

Poinsettias are short-day plants, which means they flower about 10 weeks after the daylight shortens to about 12 hours or less. Therefore, to have the plant in full flower by Christmas, it will have to be kept in complete darkness between 5 p.m. and 8 a.m. from the first part of October until Thanksgiving. Many people find the affordability of poinsettias makes it more convenient to buy new ones each year than try to foster regrowth.

Contrary to popular belief, poinsettias are not poisonous to humans or animals, but they should not be ingested due to the potential for allergic reactions. Poinsettias can help remove pollutants from indoor air, which is advantageous during the winter months when doors and windows are typically kept closed.

Select plants that have dark green foliage and no low or damaged leaves. This ensures the best success for keeping poinsettias looking healthy and vibrant throughout the holiday season.



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## Creative solutions for holiday centerpieces



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Entertaining guests is a great way to open and share your home and make memories with family and friends. If your entertaining includes a meal, chances are everyone will be sitting at the table to dine and converse. A beautifully set table can make guests feel welcome and establish the ambiance for the meal.

A centerpiece is at the heart of a well-dressed table. While centerpieces are most often associated with formal affairs, any meal or gathering is enhanced with the right centerpiece. Here are some easy and elegant centerpiece ideas to dress up your dinner table.

### FRESH FLOWERS

Floral arrangements make for great centerpieces. Such arrangements can be as simple or as extravagant as you desire. For casual meals, consider picking some flowers from your own garden or a nearby field. Spring daffo-

dils or cherry blossom branches can add color to a table. Some smaller, potted impatiens or begonias make great centerpieces for summer events, while autumn and winter blooms work for holiday gatherings and parties.

If you want an even more special touch, consider working with a florist. Explain the theme of your party and ask the florist to recommend appropriate flowers for the gathering based on your theme.

### FRUIT AND FOODS

Floral centerpieces may be some of the most popular, but food also works as a base for interesting centerpieces. Grab an unused soup tureen or some decorative vases and fill them with an assortment of items. Lemons, oranges and other citrus fruits add a splash of bold color to a table. Otherwise, look for exotic foods that have interesting appearances, like prickly pears or artichokes. Fill a tall vessel with walnuts or chestnuts for an

earthy look. A large basket brimming with assorted breads and crackers looks attractive and is also ready for guests to dig in.

### CANDY

Whimsical parties or children's events can be made more fun with clever centerpieces made from candy.

Stick lollipops into buckets filled with sand or push them into a foam form to make a candy topiary. Canisters filled with candy of all shapes, sizes and colors appeal to guests' eyes and their affinity for sweets.

### MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS

Look around the house for any number of other items that can be placed inside vases or clear containers. Bells, tissue paper, pebbles or confetti can be used to create attractive centerpieces for the table.

With some inspiration and a little creativity, hosts and hostesses can create centerpieces that add a touch of elegance to any dinner party.

## Hanging stockings with care

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Mantles adorned with garland and other holiday trinkets make fireplaces come alive for Christmas. That magic is only enhanced by hanging Christmas stockings, which are just waiting to be filled with goodies for good girls and boys. Those without a fireplace often hang stockings from windowsills and stairway banisters.

No written record exists to explain the origin of hanging stockings on fireplace mantles. Despite this, many people link the tradition to a tale about St. Nicholas. As that story goes, St. Nicholas was traveling through a village when he overheard the plight of three women. They were poor, and their father could not afford an ample dowry to marry them off. Rather than have them end up spinsters, St. Nicholas secretly tossed bags of coins through a window (or down the chimney, depending on which version of the story you read or hear), and they were captured in the girls' stockings hanging to dry by the fire. The family was overjoyed to have received such riches.

Soon news traveled about the mysterious money in stockings, and other children left out stockings for St. Nicholas to capture their own gifts.

The tradition has transformed over the years, and now many children hang stockings by the chimney with the expectation that the stockings will be filled with gifts from Santa. Traditions once suggested that only gifts from Santa were left in stockings, while gifts placed beneath the tree were from family, but that has since changed. Stockings are now meant to hold small gifts while larger items are placed under the tree.

Stockings should be hung away from the



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flames of the fire as a safety precaution. Some children even like to hang individual stockings on their bedposts instead of on a fireplace mantle.

## Prepare your home for new gifts

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Are you ready for the boxes and packages that are set to arrive under the tree? If your home annually bursts with everything from children's toys to electronics to clothing, it may be time to prepare for the gifts that have yet to find their way into your home.

Before the first strand of garland goes up and before you begin thinking about holiday wish lists, set a plan in motion to reduce what you already have in the house. This project can include the entire family and tie into holiday volunteerism that highlights this season of giving.

There's a very good chance that your closets are brimming with items that are collecting dust or

haven't seen the light of day in some time. Make these the first things to go. If something hasn't been used in a year or more, add it to the donation pile.

Kids' rooms and play areas may be some of the areas most overrun with belongings. Children are likely to get many new toys and other gifts throughout the year, so focus most of your energy on these spaces, cutting kids some slack if they don't want to part with certain items.

If children are reluctant to part with some of their belongings, stress the point that donating helps others who are less fortunate. Involve kids in the donation process, letting them see where their unused clothes and other supplies will go.

This can make giving away older toys less traumatic and more personal.

Adults also should pay attention to any belongings they can spare. Take advantage of holiday donation trucks in the area to clear your home of bulky sweaters, linens, older furniture, or kitchen supplies. These trucks service some well-known charities and associations, and items will be appreciated and put to great use.

Use the weeks prior to the holiday rush to create space for any gifts that might be arriving under your tree before Christmas Day. A little cleaning and decluttering can go a long way toward helping the less fortunate in your community.

# Finding time during the holiday season can be easy

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Perhaps no time of year is as busy as the holiday season, when social engagements and holiday shopping combine to dominate so much of what is normally our free time. Additionally, holiday travel and late nights spent at work to make up for lost time also cut into our free time, leaving many people in search of ways to add more hours to the day. Though there's no way to make a day last longer, there are ways to save some time this

holiday season.

**Go it alone.** Holiday shopping can be very time consuming, but shoppers who decide to shop alone may find themselves more productive and focused on the task at hand. Rather than going from store to store and checking items off multiple shopping lists, shoppers who shop singularly can devote all of their attention to their own lists.

**Shop online.** Another way to

save time when shopping for the holidays is to shop online. This saves you the time it takes to drive to and from the mall and walk around multiple stores, all the while saving you from the often frustrating experience of finding a parking space. In addition, you can shop online at any time of day. Rather than eating lunch at your desk or spending the last hour before you go to bed for the night idling away on the couch, you can make more

efficient use of that time by doing some holiday shopping.

**Plan ahead.** Whether shopping for holiday gifts, taking the family to buy a Christmas tree or organizing a holiday dinner with friends, the more you can plan ahead of the holiday season the less time you will waste once the season hits full swing. For example, when choosing a weekend to go Christmas tree shopping, inform others a few weeks in advance and let them

know you want to go early to avoid crowds. The same principle of planning can be applied to other aspects of the holiday season as well. Planning a meal early allows you to gradually stock up on menu items, saving you the hassle of rushing to the store at the last minute or planning a menu in the days before the party when you will already have enough on your plate.

**Don't shy away from shortcuts when hosting**

**holiday dinners.** Hosting a holiday dinner is a big undertaking, one that often finds hosts spending a significant amount of time in the kitchen. But hosts can save time by taking some shortcuts regarding the menu. For instance, when hosting an especially large meal, don't be afraid to buy some premade side dishes from a local grocery store or buy a bakery cake rather than whipping up your own homemade dessert.