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FAIRCHILD'S TROPICAL GARDEN COLUMN

Caring for holiday gift plants

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Guzmania and other bromeliads reproduce after flowering.
Kenneth Setzer / Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

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BY KENNETH SETZER
FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN

Holiday plants are a common gift or token of appreciation for party hosts this time of year. A colorful foil-wrapped pot with a perfect poinsettia in bloom is classically holiday in spirit. But like so many other gift plants — bromeliads, orchids, tiny Norfolk pines — they tend to sit ignored, only to die and be discarded.

Plants shouldn't be disposable! Here's how you can nurture some of the more common plants of the season.

POINSETTIA

Poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) is native to Mexico. Contrary to popular belief, it is not highly toxic, but it's not edible and its latex can cause skin irritation. Its flowers are small and unassuming; the classic bright red foliage often mistaken for flower petals is actually modified leaves called bracts, which can be found in white, yellow, variegated or other colors.

The poinsettia can be kept outdoors even during cold spells — just avoid exposing it to frost, rarely a problem for South Floridians. Poinsettias thrive in bright but indirect light. Keep the soil moist, but don't let it become waterlogged. This may involve replanting, or removing the saucer attached to the pot.

After the bracts fall, decrease watering but don't let the plant dry out completely. Cut stems back by half to two thirds. Poinsettias can be planted directly into the ground in South Florida. Around April, increase watering. If you've kept the plant indoors, place it outside in bright shade. Common fertilizer is fine, but don't fertilize when the plant is in bloom.

In the fall (September through November), you can start to coax flowering. Poinsettias are sensitive to the amount of light received. At least 12 hours of complete darkness are necessary to induce flowering, so taking it back indoors and placing it in a dark closet helps. If it's in the ground, try covering it with a box, but remember to remove the box in the morning. If your plant is dropping leaves, it may be due to excessively hot and dry conditions.

BROMELIADS

Bromeliads are another common gift. With more than 2,000 species and countless cultivars, including Spanish moss and pineapples, it may be tough to know exactly what you're getting. Gift bromeliads are frequently the ones with the archetypal rosette of leaves surrounding a "tank" center, likely within the genus *Guzmania*, *Vriesea* or *Aechmea*. Most bromeliads are tropical in origin, a good thing for us. They are sold while flowering, with a conspicuous, deeply colorful flower spike. Bromeliads flower only once, but don't despair!

These bromeliads like it hot and humid, but can burn in too much direct sun. While *Aechmea* (often with spiky leaf margins) can be acclimated to brighter light, *Vriesea* and *Guzmania*, with their softer, thinner less-spiky leaves, prefer more shade.

If you plant bromeliads outside, keep in mind they live primarily as epiphytes and have shallow roots that can rot if they're in perpetually wet soil. I've had luck keeping them outdoors with very little babysitting and no fertilizer. Keep them in soil that drains well, while maintaining water in their central tanks.

If you keep them as houseplants, remember they like humidity, but again, make sure the soil drains completely when watered. Remember to flush out and refill the tanks to avoid stagnation and mosquitoes.

After their flower spikes wilt, they can be removed. After flowering, bromeliads produce offshoots called "pups," which are easily separated from the mother plant when half her size or larger. While Mom won't flower again, the pups will. I've gotten many generations from a single plant this way.

NORFOLK PINE

The Norfolk pine (*Araucaria heterophylla*) is sold as a little tabletop Christmas tree, often humiliated with bows and plastic ornaments, but it can grow to over 100 feet tall in its homeland, with beautiful soft green needles.

Part of an ancient lineage of conifers, it's related to cycads, the ginkgo, and the enigmatic gnetophytes. As its name implies, it is endemic to Norfolk Island — in the South Pacific, east of Australia. However it is not in the same family as true pine trees. Often it's confused with the Cook pine (*Araucaria columnaris*), also not a pine.

The Norfolk pine is tolerant of salt and wind, seemingly perfect for coasts, though many Florida communities prohibit them. *Araucaria* are prone to frost damage, and even in warm South Florida tend to produce multiple stems and be less symmetrical than they would be at home. If you keep it indoors, make sure it gets as much light from a window as possible. Keep the soil moist, but don't let water accumulate.

I planted one in my western-facing, front yard in rocky, sandy, poor soil. The area gets brutal sun during summer, and lots of runoff from my roof. The plant thrived, but my homeowners' association made me remove it.

The second was planted in a south-facing section, getting lots more shade. That plant has also thrived, but is growing a bit more slowly, and the branches droop from lower light.

I never fertilized them and only watered them until they were established.

My recommendation is to keep the tree outdoors in a pot with a fast-draining soil mix to provide the humidity they need while limiting their growth. If the branches and needles yellow and fall off, increase watering, though it's normal for the lower branches to fall off in response to lower light.

If you have the proper space, they are gorgeous trees with a fascinating history.

ORCHIDS

Phalaenopsis orchids are another common gift. Nowadays they come in countless colors and variegations. They are low-light orchids and burn easily, though they can handle brighter conditions if accordingly watered — don't let their roots dry out completely.

Their potting medium determines how much watering they need. For example, sphagnum moss holds onto more moisture than pine bark or stones, and helps keep roots moist while discouraging rot. If water collects where the leaves meet, blot it up to avoid crown rot. Keeping sufficient humidity for them indoors might be a concern. Their roots seem to like the light available through clear plastic containers — makes sense for an epiphyte. *Phalaenopsis* orchids grow continuously, so water-soluble fertilizer can be applied biweekly.

So many other plants may find their way to you this season. We can't cover them all, but with a little research you can learn to care for them.

One final holiday gardening tip: If your holiday involves a real Christmas tree, its smaller branches will make excellent mulch or compost when the season is over.

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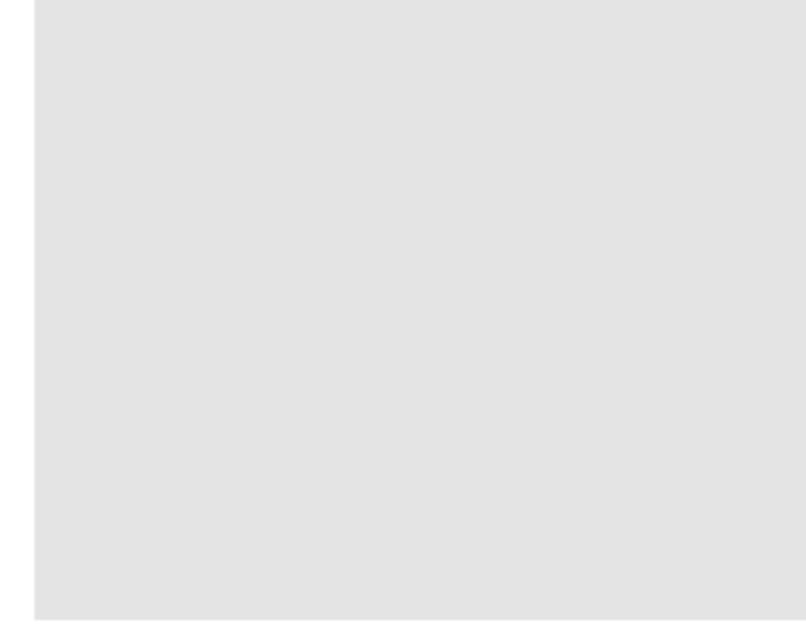
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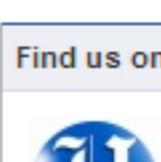


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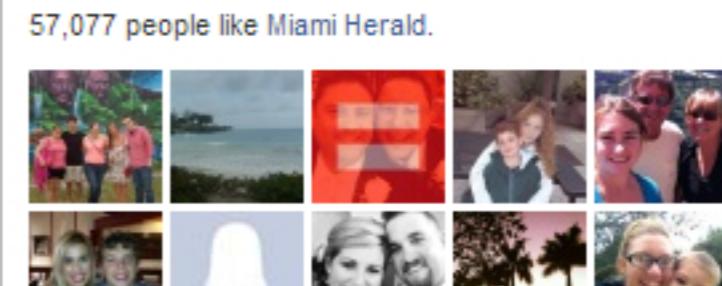
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