

Seasonal indoor plants

ANY DAY NOW MOST OF US WILL BE SETTING UP OUR CHRISTMAS TREES. And a month or so later (unless you have an artificial tree) you will drag the poor dried-out thing to the end of your driveway to be fed into the chipper and converted to mulch. But what about those other plants that we bring into our homes at this time of year? You could compost them once they're finished flowering, of course, but if you have the time and inclination most of them can be persuaded to grow on year after year.

The number one seasonal plant is without doubt the **poinsettia**. Given plenty of light and water it will maintain its colour well into January or beyond. If you want to maintain the plant until next year, grow it on until after spring frosts, and then set it out in a partially shaded spot. Prune for shape if you wish. In any event, pot it up in fresh potting soil in late August and bring it back indoors. Now for the tricky part: starting in late September the plant needs 10 hours of daylight and 14 hours of *total darkness* for about four weeks. A good way to do this is to cover it with a black garbage bag and put it in a closet for the night. Once the flowers have set, you can just keep the plant in a well-lit spot, and with any luck you'll have a colourful poinsettia in good time for next Christmas season.

Another very popular plant this time of year is the **amaryllis**. Once the spectacular blooms are finished, cut off the spent flower stem but allow the leaves to grow on. In late spring, move it outside to a shady location until late August. Bring the plant in and allow it to dry out. When leaves turn brown, unpot the bulb, cut off the spent greenery and store the bulb in cool, dry place until early December. Now repot the bulb, put it in a well lit spot, keep it moist, and very soon new stems will start to grow. Tip: the stems are very sensitive to light direction and will turn towards it – for a straight stem, give the pot a quarter turn every day or two. Standing the pot in a dish of pebbles with a little water is a good idea to help increase local humidity.

The **cyclamen** is slightly different. When blooms are finished, allow to dry out, unearth the tuber, cut off dead vegetation, and store it in a cool, dry spot. In mid-summer repot with the top just protruding above soil. When the new buds form you can leave it to grow on, or divide it into new plants.

Azaleas can be kept blooming for quite a while as long as you dead head, feed and water them (never let them dry out completely, keep the soil moist but not wet). When blooming is completely finished, stop feeding, continue watering, and after spring frosts, move the plant outside to a shaded spot. If necessary prune lightly for appearance. In early September, before the first frost, bring the plant indoors and resume feeding and watering.

The trick of longevity for **gardenias** is to give them bright light, frequent misting and fairly cool winter temperatures (ideally between 14 and 18 degrees). They also appreciate misting frequently with soft water. Every second year or so give your gardenia a trim in March or April.