



If you're lucky this holiday season, you will be the recipient of at least one beautiful plant to enjoy. So many to hope for – poinsettias, cyclamen, narcissus, rosemary, Norfolk Island pine, and kalanchoe - yet they can be a bit tricky to keep healthy in home environments. Paying attention to a few details can help you keep them going strong. Proper container care, water, drainage, light, air quality, and humidity are all key to thriving plant health. What is more satisfying than keeping a lovely plant gift going and growing?

Containers are number one on my list of details to watch. They are so important to the health of indoor plants – think about it – that is the only growing environment available for that plant to live within and draw water and nutrients from. When receiving a new plant, the container should be new, most often a generic plastic that will function just fine for you and the plant. The problem comes in the form of decorative coverings used to disguise that container. The foil, paper, or plastic that beautifully covers that nondescript container, holds the moisture where it should not be.

How to handle that? Just poke a few holes in the bottom to make sure that the excess water can drain out. I hear your question and yes – it does matter. It is important to get that standing water away from the plant root zone (wet roots equals potential plant health problems). Standing water doesn't mean five minutes of exposure once a week – that small amount of exposure generally won't cause deterioration unless the plant is near death to start with. If you have a cool and decorative container you would like to use to enhance the appearance, there a couple of ways to do that with a minimum of work. Remove the decorative covering – be sure to reserve and reuse the bow – and just place the plastic pot into an appropriate sized container.

When watering, either lift the interior container out and water over the sink or water as is, being sure to tip out the extra water after about 10 minutes. If you need to adjust the height of the interior container to accommodate the exterior container, use oasis (water absorbing floral foam) to accomplish a couple of tasks – it can be easily cut to add height or stabilize the sides and it absorbs any standing water.

An important point about reusing old containers – be sure they free from diseases to prevent plant loss. If you have had plants consistently get sick or die when in a particular container, you may need to either disinfect it (with heat, if clay, or a ten percent bleach solution) or just stop using it for live plants. Wishing does not make disease pathogens go away.

Watering should be easy, right? But in reality, watering can be a bit touchy as the amounts needed and the techniques to get it to the plant will vary according to plant species. Most holiday gift plants are tropical in origin, loving moist but not wet soil. Unless the gift is a water plant, most will hate excess moisture anywhere in contact with the plant structure – good drainage is a must.

Those plants with fuzzy leaf structures generally do not respond well to wet leaves so watering should be done from the base or at the least - under the leaves – never over the top. In order to achieve the correct level of soil moisture, consider each plant's individual needs - some will use the soil moisture more quickly than others.

How much moisture is determined by a number of factors - root density, porosity of the soil mix, and container type all play into the watering equation. Root bound plants, clay containers, and low air humidity - will make watering more frequently a necessity. With root bound plants, the water moves through the root mass more quickly as there is less soil to retain any moisture for future use. Clay containers are porous and have a tendency to absorb some moisture from the soil. And when air humidity is low, the leaves transpire at a higher rate with result being quicker usage of soil moisture.

Under situations of faster moisture loss, you will need to check the soil frequently to determine when to water. A good rule of thumb is to water when the top half inch of soil is dry to the touch. Provide enough water to thoroughly wet the soil – when adequately wet the excess water will run through the bottom as long as drainage holes exist. As with many indoor and outdoor plants, watering deeply and infrequently is better for the overall health than dumping a dribble of water in everyday.

Appropriate sunlight is important to keep those plants healthy. Most of us will put a lovely poinsettia (which likes lots of light) on a table, in the middle of a room (little or no light), to enjoy and then wonder why the leaves start falling off after a week. Well – the leaves are adjusting to that drastic reduction in light. The plant response to lower light is to drop the existing leaves. If the plant is relatively happy overall, new leaves will be produced with a cell structure that maximizes available light. But don't place any bets on immediate leaf renewal as it may take a few weeks or months for the plant to respond. If the light levels are way too low and the other growing conditions are too stressful – they will just drop the leaves and the plant will decline from there.

Air quality and humidity are other crucial components to healthy indoor plants. Cold or warm drafts can create problems for tropical plants (they like temperatures above 50 degrees F.). Cold drafts, especially when the plants are near windows, can actually freeze the leaves little by little. Most homes normally have a humidity level that is only about half of what plants need function well, so warm drafts can further dry out the air surrounding the plant.

This is easy to remedy though – awareness is the first step. If drafty, caulking around or replacing windows and doors will not only save plants but think about what it will do for your heating bill! With dry air issues, providing more humidity is easy with many central systems or by just adding a room humidifier. A small scale alternative is to fill a shallow tray with small rocks, fill with water to a level that is beneath the bottom of the plant container (no standing water on the roots please). The water evaporates creating an area of higher humidity for the plant directly above the tray.

Yes, I know, dealing with potential problems makes the to-do list longer, especially in our cold, dry climate. But when you weigh those minor tasks with the benefits of keeping those lovely gifts indoors – it's well worth the effort to keep the greenness.