



Wow – it's here again - the holiday gift giving (and receiving) season. Whichever end you are on, plants of some form will probably be somewhere in the gift stream. If you are picking out a plant as a gift for a lucky someone, be sure to take into consideration the home or office conditions it will live (or die) in, and choose appropriately. When you receive a plant - be kind to it and check into the requirements needed for the plant to survive and/or thrive. Then find a nice spot that will make it happy. Most plants will do fine for a few days in way less than adequate conditions. But even if the plant gifts chosen are only expected to live out a seasonally short life, they deserve to be kept moderately happy until the dumpster burial. Some tips for care of plant gifts will help you through that “one-more-thing-to-do” before 2007 comes rolling in.

*Abutilon x hybridum* or flowering maple was once a popular Victorian house plant, and is now being seen in the gardening realm more frequently. There are some rather interesting climbing forms but it is most common to find the dwarf hybrids in a wide range of leaf and flower colors. All like full sun, although the variegated selections will tolerate a bit of afternoon shade. If they do well for you inside and you are thinking of moving them outdoors come spring - be wary. Transplanting into the garden soil environment can be a bit tricky as the soil quality and available moisture must be balanced just about perfectly before they will prosper. But don't worry - *Abutilons* are a complete triumph as houseplants (often living for years and years) if you have to move them outside – they will blend well into patio containers. They don't need much for care. Water as needed, fertilize periodically and pinch back once in the spring to encourage a denser branching structure. Don't you just love it - everything old becomes new again.

Lemon trees (*Citrus limon*) will delight your senses when in bloom and provide your kitchen with unbelievably delicious tart fruit. Consider yourself well-loved if you receive this lovely gift! And as a bonus, they are relatively easy to care for in the home environment. Lemons will tolerate dry air as long as soil moisture is consistent and adequate. For those cultivars that are ever-bearing (*Citrus limon* x *C. reticulata* 'Meyer' & *Citrus limon* x *Citron hybrid* 'Ponderosa'), fruit production still varies from season to season, with winter and early spring yielding the highest

amount of fruit. Seasonally bearing fruit cultivars (*Citrus limon* 'Armstrong' and the *C. limon* 'Lisbon' series) produce during the winter months – for us typically December or January through April or May. Although lemons are pretty tolerant of poor soils – they should be fertilized roughly every six or seven weeks from the end of November through the beginning of May. Use a fertilizer labeled for citrus (web surfing may be in order). The amounts needed will vary according to existing fertility – so be sure to either do a soil test or have one done for you to get an accurate reading of nutrient needs. Monitor the pH periodically as plants will suffer when it varies too far outside of the 5.5 – 6.5 range. Check for residual salts in the container throughout the year, flushing the pots with fresh water as necessary to remove any accumulations. Indoor drafts are not usually a problem for lemons unless the drafts are cold – damage will occur at 28 degrees, even for a short period of time. Micro-nutrient excesses and deficiencies will show up in varying forms of leaf discoloration, tissue necrosis, or flower and fruit loss. These are not easy to visually diagnose, if nutrient issues arise, you will need help from someone fairly well versed in citrus. Fortunately, pest and disease pressures are few for the home environment, especially when plant material is purchased from a reputable source. Monitor for diseases, watch, and treat early. As with most plants grown indoors - scale, whiteflies, and gnats are probable insect issues.

Cyclamen (*Cyclamen persicum*) is a very pretty flowering plant originally from the Mediterranean area. The genus Cyclamen only contains about 20 species but the growth and flowering habits and culture requirements vary greatly. Those sold as gift plants during the winter months are often hybrids that bloom naturally at that time. *Cyclamen persicum* has a summer dormancy period followed by leaf growth in fall and flowering in the late winter and spring – which is why it is a frequently seen plant over the holidays. 40 – 50 degrees F at night and temperatures no higher than 68 degrees F during the day, are necessary for good flower development. While cyclamen need plenty of light, they sunburn easily so any window but south facing will provide enough indirect light to keep them happy. Over-watering in general and/or pouring the water over the center area of the plant will potentially rot the corm. And letting the root system stand in water will surely kick it into

death mode. Fertilize monthly – more often and you will get nice leaves and no flowers. When removing spent leaves or blooms, gently tug them off rather than cut (which leaves tissue to rot). When flowering stops, allow leaves to die back then put the whole container in a cool, dry place. It can be left alone until fall or placed outside in a dry area for the summer months. When fall arrives, encourage it out of dormancy with light periodic watering – placing the container into increasingly brighter light as leaves emerge. If repotting, do so during the dormant period, choosing a sterilized container and a well-drained, sterilized soil mix. Be sure to replant with the top portion of the corm exposed to prevent rot. In nature, the flower stalk (peduncle) and resulting seed head, go all twisty and head for the ground to drop their seed – hence the name's Greek origins from the word for circular – *kyklos*.

Olives (*Olea europaea*) – yes, the edible ones - you can grow these at home. There are many cultivars to choose from but most are relatively slow growing and as such will do well in a home environment. They all need at least 6 good hours of sun per day. Water when the top inch or so is dry to the touch. Do not overwater, they will not be happy. Fertilizer is necessary for good fruit development and overall good health, especially as these are production plants grown in a container environment. Apply a balanced product about once a month during the winter – which is their normal dormancy period. In early spring, prune to improve shape, control size, and increase vigor. Olives will do very well outside in our climate after the danger of frost has passed. Be sure to acclimate slowly, over a week or two, by slowly moving it from a somewhat shady outdoor location, into full sun. Reverse the process in the fall before temperatures reach the freezing point and bring it indoors to enjoy those olives as they ripen.

Miniature roses (*Rosa*, species and cultivar will vary) require very intense light, or direct sunlight, for 6 – 8 hours per day. The humidity levels of most homes average somewhere around 15% - 20%. Miniature roses, grown indoors, need closer to 50% humidity for healthy leaves and good flower production. If a humidifier is not an option for raising the humidity levels, place the containers onto a tray of small rocks with water in the base (do not rest the base of the rose container in water – bad, bad, bad). Night temperatures should be in the low 60's, day temperatures in the low 70's for optimal growth. If they do not receive adequate heat, light, and moisture levels in both soil and

air, any blooms present will dry and curl, leaf edges will brown, and any new buds will cease formation. Airflow is necessary to keep pesky mildews at bay (they love those humid conditions) and for good overall plant health - but not in the form of cool drafts. Feed the roses regularly, using products that fit in with your plant health care regime – either those that are mixed in with water or a slow release pellet.

The African violet (*Saintpaulia ionantha*) does best in loose soils with an optimal pH between 6.0 to 6.5. Most will tolerate low light situations and do best with between 8 and 14 hours per day. Keeping violets in an area with night temperatures of 65 – 70 degrees F, and day temperatures of 60 to 80 degrees F will guarantee a good heat level for healthy leaf and flower development. Beware of excessively high light, consistently high temperatures, and low humidity levels – these will reduce flowering and lighten leaf coloring. If caught early, reversing the undesirable conditions will allow the plant to return to good health. Root diseases move quickly through the system of a violet and occur easily when soils are oversaturated. Often physical symptoms are not visible until it is past the point of successful treatment. At that point - discard and purchase a new, healthy plant. But, don't forget to learn from the mistake. Change your watering habits to avoid the same problem in the future. Petiole rot is another rot issue that can plague violets. It results from the salts accumulating on the edge of the container and the resting, and succulent, petioles. This problem can be minimized by changing watering habits, cleaning the rim area every couple of weeks, or by applying a layer of wax on the container edge.

And while gift baskets of mixed, numerous, and wonderful tropical plants look great and make people really happy – that growing environment is not really the best for those plants. If you give one, be sure to tactfully suggest separating them out into their own containers as soon as the holidays are over. If you are fortunate enough receive such a delightful basket – set some time aside after the holiday season to replant them. They will be happier for it and so will you.