

Less Glitz; More Plants

If I were more attuned to modern merchandizing methods, I would have written about holiday plants by Labor Day. But, contrarily, the middle of December is quite time enough as the twelve days of Christmas begin on December 25th. These waiting days give us time to decide where to put the inevitable Poinsettia.

Truly, the right location is the key to making this popular plant flourish until time to replace it with an Easter lily. Years ago I saw a row of bright red Poinsettias in full bloom in early April, sequestered near the back door that opened onto the landing between the stairs to the basement and those to the main floor. These persistent plants had light from the windowed door and fairly cool temperatures. They are a tropical plant but they don't really need 24 hours of cozy comfort.

In their native Pacific islands and Mexico, they tower over modest dwelling so the species had to be tailored to fit interiors in other parts of the world. Poinsettias have a commanding presence even when genetically limited to a few feet in height and breadth. The velvety bracts are of a strong clear red, the unmistakable color associated with Christmas. On a recent Sunday afternoon I saw a glorious Poinsettia in a perfect spot – the only vivid color fronting a pair of black grand pianos at William & Mary's Ewell Hall. Not only recital halls but churches also provide the perfect setting for these masses of red.

Few of us have rooms of such dimensions that we can accommodate plants of high drama, but this plant's genes have been tamed in an astonishing number of ways. You can find plants to fit on your windowsill, even plants in colors faded to pale cream and apricot. Some plants have had their bracts ruffled and plumped. Working with this member of the varied genus, Euphorbiaceae, plant geneticists have redesigned the Poinsettia to delight the consumer. Each new holiday season sees the debut of weird and wonderful changes in color and texture but nothing says 'merry merry' like the old familiar red Poinsettia.

Another favorite, easily found in 'beginner' sizes is the Christmas cactus, Schlumbergera, which comes in two different species. Schlumbergera can bloom in time for Thanksgiving, *S. truncata* or crab cactus or later at Christmas time, *S. russelliana* syn. *S. bridgesii*. They have such scrambled genes that they no longer need to be differentiated. They vary in color from red, coral, pink to white and the flat leaves vary in the pattern of their indented edges.

Christmas cacti cover the season generously and are quite indestructible. I've seen them resurrected from the compost pile to be reinstated as a houseplant. Last spring I put mine, a piece rescued from a friend's overgrown one, under a shrub and forgot it. I discovered it raking leaves and, rather than resenting neglect, it was fully budded.

They may be cacti but they do need a little water. Buds will drop if they are too dry: they also drop if too wet, hot, cold, drafty, or just because. Bright indirect light suits them and careful use of fertilizer is important. Potassium/potash (the K in NPK) is good: too much nitrogen is not.

This is the season for mistletoe. I saw a pretty kissing ball, a cluster of artificial mistletoe enhancing a large teardrop of cut crystal. How charming it would be dangling from a chandelier in a dimly lit hallway. But of course, that contrivance would be totally unnecessary as kissing no longer needs sanctioning by the hanging of this small semi-parasitic shrub, *Phoradendron serotinum*. PDA's have enjoyed wider acceptance in our era.

Scandinavian myth honors it and it was mystical to the druids of the British Isles. Traditionally, it was invested with all sorts of curative powers and was either taken inwardly or worn outwardly. It actually does have properties with medicinal value. Horticulturally, mistletoe has been linked with the condition called 'witches' broom', those batches of twiggy growth following the pruning of a limb. It is not the pruning that encourages the twiggy-ness but the entrance of a disease organism, perhaps because of a weakening by parasitic mistletoe. Such 'brooms' are not always negative; one such mutation gave us the dwarf Alberta spruce- a lovely Christmas tree for a big pot.