

KLICKITAT PUD



Brighten the holidays with a Christmas cactus. ADOBE STOCK PHOTO BY BOZHENA_MELNYK

Give Winter-Blooming Plants as Holiday Gifts

Winter-blooming indoor plants are a welcome way to take the edge off the chill and gloom of winter. Many are ready to give as holiday gifts.

The choices go beyond traditional poinsettias and amaryllis. Colorful African violets, gloxinia, cyclamen, orchids, ornamental peppers and Christmas cactus are blooming and readily available. Dress them up with bows and cellophane, or combine a few in a basket with store-bought or garden-harvested moss and some decorations. Present them as party gifts or to a plant lover on your list.

Before you buy, consider some key care tips, including how to get them home, says Brooke Edmunds, a horticulturist with Oregon State University Extension Service. She advises taking a cardboard box with you to the store. Cover the plants after getting them into the car.

“You want to keep them protected from drafts and mimic the conditions of being in a warm situation,” Brooke says.

“Use something that won’t crush the plant but protects it against cold shock. Avoid putting them in the trunk, where it gets colder.”

Once you get the plants home, check to see if they are badly rootbound and need to be repotted in a larger container. If so, use a well-draining potting soil with perlite or peat moss in the mix. If the plant comes wrapped in foil or cellophane, cut holes in the bottom so water drains through. Most plants will rot if left sitting in water.

Potted plants are well fertilized before being shipped to stores, so let the recipient know they don’t have to worry about feeding them for several weeks. When it’s time, use a houseplant fertilizer high in phosphorous—the middle number on the label. The element helps plants bloom.

“When it comes to watering, more people overwater than underwater,” Brooke says. “Check to see if the plant needs water by sticking your finger 2 inches into the soil. If it’s dry, go ahead and water.”



In the right conditions, cyclamen will bloom for several months. ADOBE STOCK PHOTO BY ULCHIK74

The foliage of some plants, such as African violets, can be damaged if water gets on the leaves. They also get root rot easily. Avoid damage by watering from below. If you water from above, let the plant drain, then empty the saucer the plant sits in. Steer clear of misting, which can promote foliar disease.

Keep plants in bright light and in temperatures of 70 F or higher during the day and 55 F or higher at night. Avoid drafts.

Don’t be concerned if gloxinia or cyclamen die down after blooming. That is normal. You can either discard the plant and buy a new one next year or let it go dormant for a few months until foliage reappears. Then grow it like you would any houseplant.

To extend bloom, look for plants—particularly orchids and Christmas cactus—that have some tight buds as well as open flowers. Orchids can be difficult to rebloom unless you have a greenhouse or can mimic warm, moist conditions.

Colorful ornamental peppers may look delicious but are often extremely hot. Keep them off your taste buds and away from kids and pets. ■



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Breathe Easy About Home Air Quality

Q: How can I be sure I have healthy air as I seal air leaks in my home?

A: Sealing air leaks is one of the best ways to make your home more energy efficient. There are steps you can take to ensure your home has an adequate amount of healthy, fresh air.

The average home loses about half of its air volume every hour, so it can be sealed considerably—often at a low cost—and still have more than enough healthy air.

Pollutants are the main cause of poor indoor air quality, and the most dangerous pollutant is carbon monoxide. It can come from furnaces, water heaters or stoves that burn natural gas, propane or wood. The problem usually occurs in devices that are old, in need of repair, or installed or operated in a manner that prevents clear, unobstructed supply and exhaust of combustion air.

Excessive moisture in the air can also be considered an indoor pollutant because mold and dust mites thrive when relative humidity is above 60%. One sign your home is sealed too tight is window condensation, which can happen if moist air doesn't exit the home at an adequate rate.

Pollutants can cause physical reactions such as coughing or sneezing, but carbon monoxide causes more severe reactions, such as headaches, dizziness, nausea, shortness of breath, confusion, blurred vision or



An HVAC professional can inspect and test a furnace to make sure it operates safely and efficiently. PHOTO BY NAVFAC HAWAII HVAC SPECIALISTS

loss of consciousness.

What can you do to ensure healthy indoor air as you increase your home's energy efficiency?

The first strategy, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, is to eliminate or reduce the source of pollution. Eliminate carbon monoxide first. If you have a combustion furnace, it should be inspected and serviced regularly by a professional. If you have any combustion appliances, it is critical CO detectors are installed and replaced every five to seven years.

If you live in an area with radon, keep it out of your home. It is the second-leading cause of lung cancer. Radon tests are not expensive. Your local health authority can provide more information. If radon levels are too high, you will need to hire a professional to install a system to divert radon gas to the outside of your home.

Here are a few additional pollutant reduction measures to consider:

- Never smoke tobacco inside.
- Run bathroom and kitchen exhaust fans after use.
- Store toxic cleaning and painting products outside.
- Never idle a vehicle in an attached garage.

The second strategy is ventilation. Your home probably has more than enough natural ventilation from outside air leaking into the home. The best way to know for sure is to hire an energy auditor to do a blower door test.

Many experts recommend sealing the home as tight as possible and using mechanical ventilation to ensure a consistent and adequate supply of outside air.



The most energy-efficient ventilation system is a heat recovery ventilator, which pulls in fresh air from outside and captures the heat from indoor air before it is exhausted to the outside.

The third and final strategy is to clean the air. The easiest step is to simply change your furnace filter at least once every three months, and keep your furnace supply and return air registers free of obstructions.

If any rooms do not have an air return, keep the doors open.

There are several home air-cleaning systems available. Some are effective, and some are not. The EPA offers a handy online guide: epa.gov/indoor-air-quality-iaq/air-cleaners-and-air-filters-home. ■

This column was co-written by Pat Keegan and Brad Thiessen of Collaborative Efficiency. For more energy tips, go to collaborativeefficiency.com/energytips.