

TRADITIONS BEHIND TWO FAVORITE WINTER PLANTS

By Maritta Perry Grau, Frederick County Master Gardener, December, 2024

December is probably one of the most tradition-bound months of the year. We hang mistletoe in strategic spots, hook wreaths on our front doors, put up Christmas trees, tack stockings to the mantel; burn Hanukkah candles in the menorah, spin the dreidel, buy bags of “gold”-covered chocolate gilt, and seek out gift plants, just to name a few traditions. Probably every family has its own unique traditions, whether they’re celebrating Christmas, Hanukkah, or Kwanzaa.

Two plants very popular today, especially as gifts, are the amaryllis and the poinsettia. Usually, we just think about how festive they look inside and look try to help them flourish while they are in our houses. Here’s a quick hint: Grown inside, they both like to be near windows with bright, indirect light, medium-to-low temperatures, and soil watered just when the surface gets dry.

However, did you know that the amaryllis, poinsettia, and other winter season plants were once part of winter solstice celebrations, symbolizing good luck, peace, fertility, and eternal life? Check out the USDA’s Forest Service web site (www.fs.usda.gov) for information on plants and the traditions used to celebrate that winter solstice.

Amaryllis (*Hippeastrum*)

The Greek mythology associated with this plant describes a shy shepherdess who, on the advice of the Oracle of Delphi, kept stabbing herself in the heart (how much wine had that Oracle drunk when he/she gave that advice?!) to gain the attention of an indifferent shepherd. He finally noticed her only when a beautiful red flower nurtured by blood from her heart popped up. So the amaryllis serves “as a metaphor for inner strength and resilience,” because she didn’t give up, according to the website gardenia.net.

Luckily, you don’t have to stab yourself to gain someone’s attention. Instead, just cultivate the amaryllis: Once the flower forms on the stalk, move it to a place with less direct light and lower temperatures of about 65° F, says the website gardeningknowhow.com. Check the University of Maryland extension service (Amaryllis Care | University of Maryland Extension) for advice on keeping your amaryllis growing for years to come.

Poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*)

Aztecs used the poinsettia, or Mexican flame flower, as a source of dye and in rituals thousands of years ago. In the early nineteenth century, botanist Dr. Joel Poinsett was captivated by the plants when he served as the United States’ first ambassador to Mexico. Later, he grew some in his South Carolina greenhouse, then started sending them as gifts to friends and nurseries throughout the country.

Those bright red (or pink, white, striped or marbled) “flowers” are actually bracts, or specialized leaves. These showy leaves help attract pollinators. The flowers are the small, beady clusters in the center. While the poinsettia is probably not as poisonous as its reputation indicates, there is

no good scientific evidence to support medicinal uses, according to web.md and other reliable medical sites. In fact, because of their latex-based sap, poinsettias are still on Santa's caution list, as they can cause stomach upset and rashes if ingested, whether by humans or by pets.

You may want to contact the Frederick County Extension Master Gardeners or the University of Maryland Extension Office for more details on caring for these and other winter or temporary "house" plants. While you're doing that, look into our free Saturday seminars, which begin again in January, and our Master Gardener Training classes, which will start in February. You might find the classes the perfect match as you prepare for your late winter and spring activities, especially when making those garden plans for next year.

If you seek information explore the Frederick County Extension Master Gardener/Horticulture Program links below, or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office at 301-600-1596.

- FCMG website: bit.ly/FCMG-Home-Gardening
- Facebook: <https://bit.ly/FCMGFacebook>
- Instagram: <https://bit.ly/FCMGinstagram>
- University of Maryland Extension Home and Garden Information Center for gardening information and advice: bit.ly/UME-HGIC
- Frederick County Master Gardeners Publications: <http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening>



Amaryllis (*Hippeastrum*) are exuberant flowers that come in red, yellow, pink, and white or various hybrids. The flower head is usually about six inches across, with two to four blossoms, each lasting about two weeks or longer; they bloom better when slightly potbound. (*Photo courtesy of the University of Maryland Extension Service*).

Mistletoe is a parasitic, invasive plant, often found high in trees. As its roots dig into the tree branches, it sucks out nutrients from the tree. Extracts of mistletoe have been used in some small cancer treatments at Johns Hopkins. (*Photo courtesy of The Johns Hopkins University*)



Poinsettia, also known as Mexican flame flower, grows best in bright, natural light, but not in direct sun. It does well with daytime temperatures between 60° F and 70° F, and in the mid-fifties at night. *(Photo courtesy of the University of Maryland Extension Service)*



American Holly is a good choice for the home landscape, as it is non-invasive. Both a male and a female holly are needed to produce those brilliant red berries. Sometimes, the common or cultivar name indicates its gender; otherwise, you must wait until late spring to check the stamens of the blossoms—male stamens are somewhat longer than female stamens. *(Photo courtesy of the Frederick County Master Gardeners)*

University programs, activities, and facilities are available to all without regard to race, color, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, marital status, age, national origin, political affiliation, physical or mental disability, religion, protected veteran status, genetic information, personal appearance, or any other legally protected class.