

Decorating Frenzy!

You can put in or take out any activity or meaning of Christmas that suits your faith or fancy, time and taste. After years of tangled lights, broken ornaments, and shedding needles what I want from Santa is peace and time to watch the lights flicker. Needless to say, I thoroughly enjoy the riotous explosion of personal and commercial red and green and sparkle, but only as a spectator!

When it comes to haute décor my mantra is ‘take it easy’. I will not mount a stepladder to bring in remote camellia blooms or shoot mistletoe from high limbs. Decorative berries must be within reach on pretty branches just asking to be brought inside. Both evergreen and deciduous hollies provide ample material for trimming your halls. Unless you are collecting greens to decorate an armory, any nominal amount of greenery taken from your landscape will do it no harm, although do keep your eye on proportion so you don’t end up with a lopsided specimen in your garden.

It is true that plastic berries have the ability to last for generations even though their charm may be short-lived. The homegrown greens do dry out, their berries fall and if you are concerned about their staining fine surfaces, slide a skin of plastic wrap under them. The richness of leaves and needles will make it invisible.

Arranged in containers with water, greens last well but if used to drape stairway and mantel keep a close watch on them. They catch fire easily if dried out so make sure the lights you use amid them are ‘cool’ and the candles are on batteries. About lights: if you delight in draping your small trees in seasonal lights, they can be left on year after year as small lights and wires are unnoticeable unless turned on. There is a danger that if the wires are tightly wrapped around the growing branches, the limbs may become girdled, which can surely damage the bark and possibly kill the tree.

One thing to keep in mind with the use of inside lighting is to remember that some plants such as poinsettia, kalanchoe, Christmas cactus and chrysanthemum require a certain number of hours of total darkness to start flowering. Several past years about this time I have gone into great detail at tedious length about the dramatic schedule of dark and light that must be followed precisely so that your poinsettia can be kept alive and used for another holiday season. I noticed marvelous poinsettias for sale recently for very modest prices. Use them, love them, throw them onto the compost pile. Life is short!

Another plant popular for the holidays is Christmas cactus, which is not a true cactus but *Schlumbergera truncata*, an epiphyte, or tree perching plant. Perhaps your Christmas cactus, like mine, blooms at Thanksgiving. There used to be a difference between those that bloom this week and those that wait until late December or even later. *S. truncata* has leaves with strongly toothed edges and in the 1800s it was crossed with *S. russelliana* which resulted in *S. x buckleyi* with scalloped leaf edges and a later bloom period. You do know that once a century of hybridization has been undertaken, there is no reason for non-botanists to attempt to sort out the hundreds of cultivars as to their flowering times. Any day they bloom IS a holiday.

As a jungle plant this species like quickly draining soils kept barely moist during the summer. As cooler weather and shorter days come, the plant forms flower buds. That is also the time homes are heated. The hot dry air can destroy the buds and shorten the life of the flowers that do bloom. Optimum night temps are 60 F although they tolerate 75 degrees in the daytime.

If you wish to share this plant you can twist off pieces 2 or 3 segments long and put them into a freely draining medium deeply enough that they stand up straight. Do not overwater.

Just as Christmas cactus is not a cactus, Christmas rose is not a rose but a hellebore, a perennial member of the buttercup family. Because they resent being dug up and moved, they are best left in their beds outside but the blossoms are very long lasting when cut and brought inside. The newer helleborus hybrids come in more interesting flower forms and colors. Even their tendency to hang their heads has been modified. The older cultivars had to be planted atop a wall so their lovely faces could be easily studied.

They are so charming that you may wish to preserve them by drying. It can easily be done by nesting them in silica gel, borax, or sand. Silica gel is a sandlike crystal that varies in texture from rough to fine. It will dry most blooms in a few days to a week. Sift the product gently around the flower, taking care that it is completely covered. When dry they can be combined with other evergreens if the hellebore leaves are too weather worn to be attractive.

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