

## **Plants Can Make Great Holiday Gifts**

Photo of cyclamen by Michele Rugo

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The holidays are upon us once more with grocery stores and nurseries overflowing with cheery red poinsettias in bright shiny foil. Though they make for festive home and office décor, poinsettias can be difficult to maintain beyond the Christmas season. Why not consider giving a plant this year that can help to brighten the winter months long after the decorations have been put away?

The following are a few suggestions which can be found locally, are relatively easy to care for and at least one will be sure to delight the foothill folks on your gift list. Purchase from a reputable grower, place one or more in an open box, crate or tray lined with festive tissue paper and mission accomplished!

### **Amaryllis**

This is often sold as a bulb in a decorative container; a bit of regular watering produces large and brilliant flowers supported on long stems. In addition to red or white, newer varieties include ruffled, multiple-headed, soft pastels and candy -striped. Both children and the young-at-heart will enjoy seeing the plant seemingly grow daily until the heady blooms emerge.

Once the foliage has turned brown, the bulb can be stored in a cool place and brought out to flower again or be planted in an outdoor, sheltered container. In Sunset zones 8 and higher, it may even grow in a sunny garden location with well-drained soil.

### **Christmas cactus**

These are so named because they bloom this time of year. These nearly carefree cacti come in shades of red, pink, fuchsia and white. Requiring minimal water and without the prickly spines of most cacti, they make wonderful houseplants but can also be placed outside on a sheltered porch.

If you're looking to start a new holiday tradition, it's not unusual for lush, healthy specimens to be passed down between generations since cuttings root easily.

### **Christmas fern**

The Christmas fern is native to North America and is happy as a houseplant or planted outdoors in a shady location. As a healthful bonus, ferns serve as natural indoor air filters because they help to remove harmful chemicals and increase oxygen levels. This particular variety stays a beautiful verdant green all year long.

### **Cyclamen**

Cyclamen make good houseplants but absolutely thrive outdoors in planted containers during cool, wet weather. Avoid covering the bulb with soil. Found in vibrant shades of crimson, cranberry, pink and white, cyclamen make nice additions to wine barrel planters and add color throughout the winter. Consider red and white shades that will help decorate through Valentine's Day.

### **Paper-whites and Daffodils**

Cheerful and fragrant, these flowering bulbs can be forced in different mediums like soil or pebbles. Later they can be transplanted outside and often naturalize and multiply in garden beds or along hillsides. These bulbs do particularly well in our area since they are anathema to our local ground squirrels and gophers.

Other possibilities include lavender, rosemary, baby olive trees, dwarf conifers like cypress or juniper, kalanchoe and for those with winter vegetable gardens, even salad greens in nursery packs. Many can be transplanted into gardens after decorating a tabletop or counter.

Remember to keep the specimens small or of a size no larger than 4" nursery pots so you don't unintentionally give someone more of a job than intended. If gifting more than one plant, group in 3 or 5 for the most pleasing visual display.

Presenting friends and family with relatively uncomplicated plants such as these may also provide an opportunity to discover a newfound love of plants and gardening – for some, one of the best gifts of all.

*For more information or help with foothills gardening call 754-2880, email [mastergardener@co.calaveras.ca.us](mailto:mastergardener@co.calaveras.ca.us) or visit [ucanr.edu/sites/CalaverasCountyMasterGardeners](http://ucanr.edu/sites/CalaverasCountyMasterGardeners).*