

It's a testament to the talents of those who produce flowers in BC's greenhouse industry that December gives us some of the most beautiful and colourful specimens of the entire year.

Giving and receiving flowering plants like azalea, cyclamen and poinsettias has become as much a holiday tradition as any other you could name. To be able to enjoy the spectacular colours of the many plants available at this time of the year while winter rages on outside is a wonderful treat.

But what if you've been given a lovely Christmas offering and you don't have a clue how to look after it? After all, not everyone has a green thumb, but you certainly want your gift plants to last as long as possible.

Here's a brief guide to caring for those holiday plants that you may have received this month. One thing to keep in mind is that most holiday season plants share a preference for cooler temperatures. Their blooms will last much longer if the house is slightly cooler than normal. So, turn the thermostat down a degree or two; your plants will give you more pleasure and you'll get to wear that sweater you got for Christmas last year!

AZALEA-definitely likes it cool and moist. Don't let this plant dry out or the blooms will shrivel up and die. A great plant for showing off near a cool window, as the flowers will last for several weeks if bought at the right stage.

AMARYLLIS-too much water will cause the grapefruit-sized bulb to go soft, so allow to dry slightly between watering. Turn the pot so the flower stalk doesn't stretch toward the light. Cooler temperatures will allow the huge and exotic blooms to stay fresher.

CYCLAMEN-another plant which will produce blossoms for weeks on end-if it's kept in a cooler location. Keep the plant moist but not too wet. An ideal spot would be a sunny window in a cool room. You can bring it out to show off when the company comes over. If you're short of space try the "mini" varieties.

KALANCHOE-because this plant is a succulent it can get quite dry to touch between waterings. It likes a bright window and again, cooler temperatures. Another plant which will bloom for weeks in the right conditions.

CHRISTMAS CACTUS-one of my favourites at any time of the year. It needs a cool location with bright, but not direct light. Don't overwater because it stores moisture in its foliage. Try not to move it around when the buds are unopened as this inevitably causes a few of them to fall off.