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FUN FACTS AND SAFETY TIPS ABOUT HOLIDAY PLANTS

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Holiday plants are a major part of this festive season. Here are some fun facts and safety tips about common holiday plants.

If you have real mistletoe, be aware all parts of this plant are toxic. For safety, it needs to be kept out of reach of children and pets.

While mistletoe may bring thoughts of kissing a loved one, in the plant world it is a parasite found hanging in tree branches. Some can kill the tree they are growing on.

Mistletoe cannot live without a specific plant host. The berry has a glue-like substance that allows it to stick to trees where it germinates and grows on the tree, obtaining nutrients and water from its host plant.

Christmas cactus also grows on tree branches but they do not harm the trees they grow on. They are epiphytes which is a plant that grows on another plant but does not parasitize that plant.

They are native to the rain forests of Brazil where they grow on trees in a very humid environment. For this reason, they need indirect light and consistently moist soil even though we call them a cactus.

They are thermo-periodic plants which simply means they need short days and cool nights to bloom. If a Christmas cactus is not blooming, provide cooler nights and 15 hours of complete darkness each night.

The dark period needs to be uninterrupted. Place the plant in a closet and cover it with a black cloth, plastic bag or box. This treatment of cool nights and short days needs to begin 8 weeks before you want Christmas cactus bloom. Stop the short day treatment once flower buds begin to form.

While Poinsettia has long had a reputation for being poisonous, like Christmas cactus it is not toxic and can be enjoyed without this worry.

It is hard to believe these bright, colorful plants originated from a common weed and the colorful parts we enjoy are not flowers at all but leafy bracts.

And Poinsettia is proof of what plant breeding and good marketing can do. Poinsettia's popularity grew after the plant was used to adorn the Johnny Carson television stage during holiday seasons.

And how did ornamental pepper become a holiday plant? Through plant breeding of course. The heavy crop of small, bright red cone-shaped fruits have made them popular as potted holiday plants.

While the fruits of ornamental peppers are edible, some of them can be quite hot so keep them out of reach of children and pets. They would not enjoy the heat of some of these peppers if they tasted one or handled them and then rubbed their eyes.

Another plant sold at the holidays for its bright red and orange fruit is Jerusalem cherry. Do not confuse these plants for ornamental pepper. Jerusalem cherry has round berries and they are poisonous.

Other holiday plants listed poisonous include Holly, Japanese Yew (used in greenery), Amaryllis, Cyclamen, Kalanchoe and Gardenia.

While the severity of toxicity of these plants often depends on the size and weight of the person or pet ingesting them and how much they ingest, being sick during the holidays is never fun and a reaction or toxic effect can be quite severe.

Play it safe and keep all plants, even those listed as not poisonous, out of reach of children and pets.