

# IN THE DIRT

*Whiteflies-tiny pure-white gnat-like insects; fly up from undersides of plant leaves when disturbed*

Whiteflies are a fairly common pest of poinsettia. If brought into a home on infested plants, whitefly populations multiply rapidly. Inspect plants closely for signs of white flies, such as sticky leaves; or for the insect itself. Whiteflies are not flies. They are related to aphids, mealybugs and scale insects and feed on plant sap. Adult whiteflies are very tiny and have wings covered with a white powdery wax. Adult females can lay between 200 and 400 eggs. Upon hatching, flattened nymphs or crawlers attach themselves to leaf undersides and feed for about four weeks before pupating. Whitefly feeding leads to weakened plants and leaf yellowing and dropping.

Consider discarding heavily infested plants as white flies are challenging to control. For smaller populations, yellow sticky traps are recommended to reduce their numbers or contact your local extension office for recommendations on how to safely apply insecticides.



## Fun Facts & Safety Tips about Holiday Plants

By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator

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.

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## GARDEN GUIDE - THINGS TO DO THIS MONTH

- January is a good time to order flower and vegetable seeds. Many varieties sell out early.
- To prolong bloom, protect poinsettias from drafts and keep them moderately moist.
- Turn and prune house plants regularly to keep them shapely. Pinch back new growth to promote bushy plants.
- Avoid heavy traffic on the frozen, dormant lawn. The crown of the plant may be severely damaged or killed.
- Brush snow from evergreens as soon as possible after a storm. Use a broom in an upward, sweeping motion. Serious damage may be caused by heavy snow or ice accumulating on the branches.
- Use sand instead of salt for icy spots on the sidewalk.
- Feed the birds regularly and see that they have water. Birds like suet, fruit, nuts and bread crumbs as well as bird seed.
- Check young trees and shrubs for rodent or rabbit damage. Prevent injury with fencing or protective collars.
- When reviewing your garden catalogs for new vegetable varieties to try, an important consideration is improved insect and/or disease resistance.
- Check stored fruits and vegetables such as potatoes and apples for bad spots which may lead to decay.