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Ask a Specialist: Do You Have Tips for Keeping Holiday Plants Healthy?

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ASK A SPECIALIST: DO YOU HAVE TIPS FOR KEEPING HOLIDAY PLANTS HEALTHY?

LOGAN, UT – Answer by: Taun Beddes, Utah State University Cooperative Extension horticulturist

Several indoor plants are commonly used to commemorate the holiday season. Poinsettias are the most popular. Two other plants, Norfolk Island pine and holiday cactus, are also common. It is important to properly care for these holiday plants to keep them perky. Consider these tips.

- Poinsettias are native to Mexico and Central America. In the early 20th century, a family in California began cultivating the plant for commercial sale. Through extensive breeding programs and hard work, hundreds of varieties exist today, adorning homes and businesses. To keep poinsettias healthy, do not expose them to hot or cold air drafts. Place them in bright, indirect light. Water carefully, as poinsettias die most often from improper watering. To prevent this, never water a plant while it is sitting in a cellophane decorative sleeve. These sleeves do not allow excess water to drain from the pot and cause the roots to rot. A better method of irrigation is to feel the soil with your finger. When the soil surface feels dry, remove the plant from the sleeve and gently water it in the sink with lukewarm water until the soil is saturated. Leave the pot in the sink for an hour or so to allow excess water to drain from the soil. It can then be placed back in

the decorative sleeve until it needs to be watered again.

- Norfolk Island pine, commonly called star pine or umbrella pine, is another plant often sold for the holiday season. In its native habitat, the mature trees are quite beautiful. The Norfolk Island pine is actually not a true pine but is distantly related. It can easily be grown as a houseplant, and as with most other houseplants, it does not tolerate overwatering. Grow it in indirect, bright light, but not excessive heat. In good conditions, Norfolk Island pine can grow as tall as 10 to 15 feet indoors over a number of years.

- The holiday cacti group includes species with names such as Christmas cactus, Thanksgiving cactus and Easter cactus. These names are derived from when the species is intended to bloom. Instead of only blooming during the particular holiday for which they are named, most varieties, especially the newer ones, can be induced to flower for the majority of the winter season. The trick is to place plants in areas where they are exposed to night temperatures below 50 to 55 F for six to eight weeks. Cool rooms with bright light or large windows and sliding deck doors are good spots. These cool temperatures cause flower bud formation. Turn the plant 180 degrees every two months so the plant blooms for the entire winter season. Irrigate sparingly during the winter and somewhat more in the summer. If fertilizer is needed, apply a quality fertilizer in the spring or summer, not in the winter.

