

Christmas houseplants

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Houseplants need to be pampered to thrive in a modern house. Wilting, flower failure and pest and disease outbreaks are common problems. Here's what to look out for.

Azalea

Q Why has my azalea withered and died?

A Leaves and flowers may fall off an azalea exposed to draughts, watered erratically, or if the rootball dries out. The secret of success with azaleas is keeping the compost moist at all times. Azaleas are acid-lovers so if you live in a hard water area, use rainwater if you can.

When the water is at room temperature, submerge the whole pot in it. You will see air bubbles coming from the pot - wait until these stop, then remove the pot and let it drain. Don't leave azaleas standing in water - this can be as bad as under-watering. How often you water will depend on the temperature of the room. You will probably need to water two or three times a week, but small pots may need daily watering. Increase the humidity around the plant by standing it on a tray of wet pebbles and spraying daily with tepid water. Remove faded flowers carefully so you don't damage the growing buds underneath. Azaleas don't like hot, dry rooms and prefer to be cool; a hall or porch is ideal. Make sure you don't put them near radiators. They will do best at a constant temperature of 10-15°C, though they will survive at temperatures as low as 4°C. Excessive heat will cause the leaves and buds to drop and inhibit flowering.

Azaleas like to be in bright, indirect sunlight and will do well on a west, east, or south facing windowsill. Don't leave them on a windowsill at night as the temperature behind the curtain can drop rapidly.

You can revive a plant showing early signs of drought by plunging the pot into a bowl of tepid water, but one that has been exposed to prolonged drought may not recover.

Q How do I keep my azalea for next year?

A Once flowering has stopped, begin to feed your azalea weekly with a liquid feed. Pot on in ericaceous compost and if there are any long shoots, prune these to half their length. After the last frosts in spring, stand the plant outdoors in a semi-shaded position.

Azalea roots are very sensitive to drought and waterlogging so add grit to ensure good drainage; the peat-based compost will provide a moist, acidic environment. Bring the plant back indoors just before the first frost and it should flower again the following spring.

Christmas cactus

Q How do I stop the flowers falling off?

A Christmas cacti do best at an even temperature of 13-15°C and the flowers should last about six weeks. Water sparingly, but don't let the compost dry out completely. Plants can be saved for next year,

but let them rest for two months (keep cool and water rarely). Then stand them outside in summer in a shady spot.

Q How can I get it to flower again next year?

A The Christmas cactus is a short-day plant so it will only flower as the days shorten. When you bring it inside at the end of summer, keep it in a room where it will not get artificial light until the flower buds develop, then it can be moved. Choose a room with a similar temperature, or shock may cause the buds to drop.

Q My plant has rotted. What happened?

A The usual cause of root and base rot is overwatering. Although water is needed during the winter, the compost should be allowed to dry between waterings and kept only just damp. Discard the plant if the rot is well advanced, but you could try taking some cuttings from less affected parts.

Q How do I get rid of the 'cotton wool' growths on it?

A This 'cotton wool' is the protective coating of mealy bugs. Adults and eggs are covered in tufts of white, waxy wool. These sap-feeding insects cluster around the joints in the leaf-like stems. A heavy attack can weaken the plant.

A light infestation can be dealt with by hand. Pick off individuals with a paintbrush or similar

implement. To clear a heavy infestation, use repeated sprays of a houseplant insecticide approved for use on cacti and succulents.

Cyclamen

Q Why has my plant wilted?

A Cyclamen wilt due to lack of water. To rehydrate a plant, stand the pot in a saucer of tepid water and let it soak up moisture from the base. After a couple of hours, tip out any water left in the saucer. In heated houses, wilting is often due to high temperatures. Keep them around 5-10°C.

Cyclamen are prey to vine weevils. If the plant wilts for no obvious reason, these could be to blame. Check the corm to see if it is infested with white, maggot-like grubs which are about 9mm long. They can quickly eat their way through the corm, often severing the plant just below soil level.

Plants with severe damage are best discarded, along with the compost. If damage is restricted to a few roots, tease out the roots and wash them carefully to make sure no grubs remain. Repot in fresh compost. Keep an eye out for adult weevils and destroy them.

Q Why has my cyclamen stopped flowering?

A This is probably due to lack of light and underfeeding. While flowering, they need good light and winter sunlight is weak. During the flowering period, give the plant a weekly liquid feed, or add a slow-release fertiliser to the compost.

Q How do I keep my cyclamen for next year?

A Once spring arrives and your cyclamen finishes flowering, stop watering to allow the corm to dry out. Store the dry corm until late summer when it will begin to show signs of growth. Repot using fresh compost so the corms are just showing above the compost and start to water again.

Poinsettia

Q Why has my poinsettia wilted and the 'flowers' faded?

A Poinsettias wilt when they get too hot and dry. They do best at a draught-free 15-21°C and should keep flowering for 12 weeks. To extend the flowering and keep the leaves in tip-top condition, place the pots on a pebble tray, mist the leaves and feed regularly. Put your plants in the brightest possible winter light to maintain the bract colour at its best.

Water the poinsettia from the top of the pot, allowing the compost to become completely dry before the next application. But if the leaves start to wilt, water thoroughly with tepid water.

Q How do I make my poinsettia 'flower' again next year?

A You are unlikely to get your poinsettia to produce its colourful bracts again next year, as 'flowering' is triggered by a regime consisting of 14 hours a day of constant darkness at a temperature of 18-20°C, followed by ten hours of daylight every day for eight weeks.

If you'd like to have a go at creating these conditions, be prepared to provide light and dark in the sequence required starting in September. To provide adequate darkness, try putting the plant in a sealed cupboard or covering it with a thick, black polythene bag.

Winter cherry

Q Are winter cherries (*Solanum capsicastrum*) poisonous?

A Yes, the brightly coloured fruits are poisonous.

Q Why have the leaves fallen off my winter cherry?

A Leaf fall is usually due to the plant being dry. Keep the compost just moist at all times. Excessive heat can also encourage leaf fall.

Q How do I keep my winter cherry for next year?

A To get fruit next year, prune back stems by half after fruiting has finished (usually during February or March), stop feeding and reduce watering. Place outside for the summer in a sheltered but sunny spot, feed and water regularly. When the flowers appear during summer, spray with tepid water to help with the production of fruit. Then return indoors by September.

Common pests and problems

Q What is the grey, fluffy growth killing the leaves of my houseplants?

A This is grey mould (*Botrytis*), a menace to cyclamen and poinsettias. It typically affects plants grown in cool, humid conditions where the grey, fluffy mould spreads rapidly. Destroy the affected parts. To stop grey mould recurring, improve ventilation and reduce watering and misting.

Twist gently when removing dead stems from cyclamen so that they break cleanly at the base - half stems that are left can rot.

Q What are the small, white flies on my houseplants?

A These are adult whitefly, though it's their larvae that do the most damage. Apart from a brief 'crawler' stage, the larvae live as immobile scales on the underside of leaves. They feed on sap and excrete sticky honeydew. The adult flies are wedge-shaped and fly around in clouds when disturbed.

Eradication is difficult and will require spraying with a houseplant insecticide every few days until well after the infestation appears to have ceased. Try a systemic insecticide containing imidacloprid, like Provado Ultimate Bug Killer which is available in a ready-to-use aerosol.