

SOME HOLIDAY PLANTS TO GIVE AND RECEIVE

By Ralph E. Mitchell

With the massive number of Holiday plants available at garden centers and florist shops, last minute gift giving to your favorite gardener may be easier than you think. While Poinsettias (a past article) are an obvious choice, and there are certainly many other choices not mentioned in this article, consider the ready-to-bloom Amaryllis, the humble African violet, or even something different like an exotic Desert Rose. Other cheery evergreen plants such as small-to-medium-sized containerized Norfolk Island pines or a nicely shaped Rosemary topiary are also appreciated as gifts.

Amaryllis is a colorful and spectacular flowering plant to enjoy. Perhaps the most popular use of amaryllis is when they are grown in containers. While September through January is an acceptable time period to pot-up an amaryllis bulb, Amaryllis are available already sprouted or in ready-to-plant kits. Starting from scratch is no problem. Select a container which is big enough to allow two inches of space between the bulb and the side of the pot. Center the bulb and roots and fill in the potting medium so that half the bulb is exposed. Water the bulb in well and set the pot in a bright location. Don't water the bulb again until it begins to sprout. As the bulb begins to sprout, set the pot in a warm location that receives several hours of direct sun. Resume the watering to ensure even moisture without over-watering. As soon as the flowers open, move the plant to a bright, indirect light out of the direct sun. This will allow the flowers to stay at their prime for a longer period of time. Once the flowers have faded and have been removed, move the plant into a light shade area. Water and feed the plants to promote new growth. Containerized plants can be left in the original pots for two or more years.

African violets not only make great gifts for the gardener, but also have a place in every home. African Violets do well in low light (even artificial light), and come in a wide variety of flower colors, leaf style, and texture! These

plants will do best with indirect light. The plants will tell you if they are getting enough light. Too low of a light intensity, and the African violet will not flower well. Too much light will result in leaves that are pale or yellowish-green. The literature indicates that an African violet needs about 1,000 foot-candles of light for 8-12 hours per day. Hand-in-hand with light requirements is making sure your plants receive the proper temperature. Try to keep your night-to-day temperatures between 70-80°. Temperatures over 80° can affect growth and flowering. Air conditioning can help provide an even temperature. In association with temperature of course is humidity. Humidity can be maintained by placing pots on pebble-filled trays of water. Make sure that the pots do not touch the water directly.

Ready-to-use African violet potting soils are usually available at any retail garden center. The soil medium is generally made up of peat and perlite (volcanic material) which provides water retention and good drainage. Water African violets from the top or the bottom with room temperature or warm water. Using a good liquid fertilizer at intervals recommended on the package label will ensure good growth and frequent flowering. Good leaf color and normal flowering are signs that your feeding program is working. Cold water can cause spotting on leaves - use warm water as mentioned earlier. Soluble salts that accumulate on pot rims can cause problems to leaf petioles from chemical burns. The cure for this can include watering from the surface to flush excess fertilizer salts away or by using fertilizer less frequently.

For something different and exotic, consider the gift of a Desert Rose. The Desert Rose is not a rose at all, but a relative of some more familiar plants including Allamandas, Plumerias, and Carissas. It originally is from desert regions ranging from Africa to the Arabian Peninsula. Noted for thick stems and a swollen base, Desert Roses have smooth grayish green branches and

glossy green leaves. The base of the plant or caudex is often noticeably swollen. The flowers in cultivated Desert Roses are tubular with flared lips in shades of red and pink to white. Some desert roses are even fragrant!

Desert Roses are good for containers or in the landscape. Containers work well because they offer very good drainage and mobility if winter temperatures or overly rainy weather occur. Use a well-drained (cactus) potting mix and a pot wide enough to accommodate the expanding swollen stem. Select a full sun area in well-drained soil. Soil modifications may be needed to ensure a well-drained area as excess moisture will promote stem and root rots. Raised beds are one idea using loose rubble or rocks with sandy soil to build a flat, 18-inch mound. Using a mixture of 75 percent sand to 25 percent top soil, plant the Desert Rose at the same depth it was in the pot being careful not to damage the roots. Don't use organic mulch around Desert Roses as excess moisture retention can encourage rots. Desert roses can take a lot of rain in temperatures above 80° as long as the soil is well-drained. However, cool temperatures and moisture will initiate problems. Don't be surprised by significant leaf loss during the winter – this is normal. Temperatures below 40° can cause branch tip damage and accordingly protection during cold weather may be needed.

Norfolk Island Pines make excellent Holiday plants and "living" mini-Christmas trees, The Norfolk Island Pine is native to Norfolk Island in the South Pacific. These evergreen trees develop a single trunk and have a more or less pyramidal shape. The leaves are dark green and needle-like in appearance. The flowers are small and inconspicuous. If you ever see a mature plant with fruit you will remember it! The inedible fruits are oval cones that look like green pineapples about 6-12 inches in diameter and weighing up to 15 pounds. While small, these trees make great subjects for patios, pool cages, and Florida rooms during the Holiday season as well as year-round. With proper care, Norfolk Island Pines can live for a long time as a house plant. It is very important, however, that

you are careful not to over-water or over-fertilize. Over-watering, as-well-as excessive dry air caused by indoor central heating will cause potted Norfolk Island Pines to drop the lower foliage. Norfolk Island Pines prefer full sun, but can also tolerate bright indirect light indoors. An acid, fertile soil mixture is recommended as a potting medium. Potted plants should be fed with most any liquid fertilizer at normal strength once every two weeks or according to label instructions. Norfolk Island Pines grow fairly rapidly and repotting will be required now and again. Repotting every two or three years will help prevent the plant from growing too rapidly and keep it in bounds. Take care not to plant the trees too deeply, as these plants can develop root or stem rots. Eventually, these plants will outgrow their useful size to a point where most people will not want to deal with them. Once your plant gets too big for a normal-sized pot, please don't be tempted to plant it out in the yard - these trees can get up to 80 feet tall! They also have large surface roots and are known to uproot in storms. This plant really does not produce much shade and the trunk tends to curve and lean as it grows to an enormous size. This tall tree also makes it a common target for lightning strikes.

In addition to Norfolk Island Pines, neatly trimmed rosemary plants make a festive and aromatic treat during the Holidays. In addition to the mini-Christmas tree appearance, you also get a fragrant plant that fills the room with that good rosemary scent every time you brush up against it. Rosemary is a Mediterranean herb that is often used as a topiary, container plant, or landscape shrub. This evergreen woody shrub has gray-green foliage and aromatic, needle-like leaves with small light blue flowers in winter and spring. Left to develop untrimmed, this plant can grow three to five feet tall with a spread of four to five feet. Clip topiary rosemary plants every few weeks to encourage new, fragrant growth and to maintain a certain shape. Also consider planting this hardy herb in the landscape in a full-sun area with well-drained soil. Rosemary is an essential plant in any herb garden.

Again, these are just a few of the Holiday plants that came to mind that you might consider

giving or enjoy receiving. Last minute or post-Holiday living gifts such as these plants will be appreciated by just about everyone!

For information on all types of indoor and outdoor plants, please contact our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 941.764.4340 from 1:00pm-4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our **Plant Clinics** are available across the county:

- **Demonstration Garden** (6900 Florida Street, PG) Thursdays 9:00am-11:00am.
- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** Thursdays 10:00am-1:00pm.
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1st and 3rd Thursday of month 1:00pm-3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3rd Tuesday of month 1:00pm-4:00pm.
- **South Gulf Cove Learning Garden** 3rd Wednesday of month 9:00am-12:00pm.

Monthly **Plant Clinics** are Saturdays 9:00am-12:00pm at the following locations:

- **Peachland Promenades Publix** - 2nd Saturday of month.
- **Home Depot Murdock & Home Depot Punta Gorda** - 3rd Saturday of month.

Ralph Mitchell is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for the Charlotte County Cooperative Extension Service. You may contact him by email (Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com). You may also contact a volunteer Master Gardener 1:00pm-4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 941.764.4340 or by email (Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com).

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4340. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

Resource:

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Jones, H.C. (1991), African Violets, The University of Florida/IFAS Extension Service.

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Gilman, E.F. & Watson, D.G. (1993) Araucaria heterophylla: Norfolk Island Pine. The University of Florida/IFAS.

Naylor, C. Everyone Should Grow Rosemary. The University of Florida/IFAS Extension Service, Leon County.