



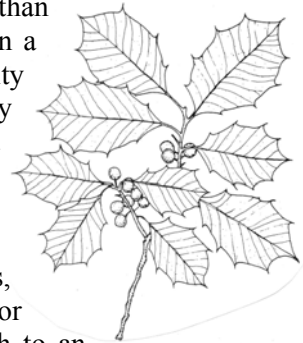
## Living with Holiday Plants

During the holiday season, flowering plants provide beauty and are a traditional gift item in West Virginia. Most of these decorative plants are harmless, but some may be hazardous or even dangerous to children and pets if part of the plant is eaten or handled. Even plants that are not toxic do present choking hazards in children.

The **poinsettia**, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, is the most ubiquitous holiday plant. Its red flowers are actually modified leaves called bracts. The yellow portion in the center of the bracts is the flower. Initially poinsettias lasted only a few days in the home, but today's varieties are more compact, durable, and long-lasting. Red, pink, white, gold, marbled, and variegated varieties are now available. Contrary to a widely held belief, poinsettias are not poisonous, but they are a concern with children.

**Christmas cactus**, *Schlumbergera bridgesii*, is a wonderful plant to give and to receive, not only because of its common name, but because it is easy to grow and is a handsome plant, even when it's not flowering. It sends out sprawling chains of inch-long dark green, elliptical leaves linked together. To ensure flowering, the plant should be kept quite dry, unfertilized and at a temperature of about 55° during November and December. At Christmas time it produces up to two 2-inch blossoms either from notches in the stems or from their tips. The flowers are show-stoppers ranging in color from a deep purple to pale salmon. It adds some winter color just when you begin longing for spring to come. Brighten up your holiday season with this succulent beauty. It prefers rich soil that is well-drained and partial shade or a window with bright, reflected light.

**Christmas orchids**, *Cattleya trianaea*, are lovely and are not as delicate as some may think. The special care that orchids require consists mainly of attention to their specific needs for ventilation, humidity, and light. In West Virginia orchids can stand full winter sunshine from November to March; during the rest of the year a thin curtain should be drawn between them and sun. The ideal humidity for orchids is 60 percent or higher, far greater than that usually maintained in a heated house. The humidity can best be controlled by setting the plant in a plastic or metal tray that has been filled to a depth of an inch or more with perlite, pebbles, charcoal, marble chips or other material and 2 inch to an inch of water. The pot should rest on this material without sinking into the water level. Orchids prefer fairly high humidity, but they are paradoxically averse to excess water.



**Amaryllis**, *Hippeastrum spp.*, is native to South Africa. It is a popular flowering bulb and is often used as a gift plant. The modest foliage is accented by a bold stem that produces magnificent large, funnel-shaped blooms in colors of vivid red, orange, peppermint, salmon, pink, and white. The flowers are long lasting and, once faded, should be removed along with the stems. Many varieties of amaryllis will flourish outdoors in West Virginia so they can be planted in the garden for many seasons of colorful bloom.

**Christmas rose**, *Helleborus niger*, has divided, leathery, evergreen foliage that provides an interesting setting for the cup-shaped, droopy flowers. This is one more of the welcome heralds of spring that blooms in the late winter or the very early spring. When the flowers open, they are white and then turn to pink as they age. The Christmas rose will perform best in partial shade in moist, rich, well-drained soil that is somewhat alkaline. Seed germination is improved by freezing the seeds. Plant in the fall in a protected bed or seed flat; keep moist and maintain a temperature of 70-75 degrees F; germination will occur in the spring. Top-dressing with compost or rotted manure will be extremely beneficial to this early-blooming perennial. Protect from strong winds. This plant will self-sow and spread slowly to naturalize a shady area. It is reported to be toxic if eaten.

**Christmas peppers**, *Capsicum annuum*, are a recent addition to the holiday plant gift list. They come in many different species, and the fruit should be treated with the respect as *Capsicum* is a species of "hot pepper." Capsaicin is an irritating compound that gives the peppers their pungent odor and causes the skin irritation that is commonly associated with the processing or consumption of hot peppers. The severity of the irritation depends on how much capsaicin is actually in the pepper and how long it is in contact with the skin. Symptoms that are common with hot pepper exposures include burning pain, redness, and irritation of the skin. Blistering is not common but can occur after prolonged exposure to capsaicin. The West Virginia Poison Center recommends several treatments for hot pepper irritation. Some work better than others. Individuals should wash their hands well with water and soap. Washing in alcohol is recommended as the capsaicin resin is more easily dissolved by alcohol. It is recommended that you wash your hands with soap and warm water again. The most effective treatment seems to be the soaking of the affected area in chilled vegetable oil for at least one hour. Relief is not accomplished by just applying the oil to the affected area; it must be completely immersed in the chilled vegetable oil. Soaking the affected area in a solution of half vinegar-half water for 30 minutes is also recommended.

The chilled vegetable oil treatments seem to be the most effective. The best treatment is prevention--wear gloves. The Christmas pepper is an annual, therefore, it should be discarded after fruit drop.

Holiday plants with berries present the most common poison hazard in West Virginia. These include mistletoe, holly, bittersweet, and Jerusalem cherry.

**Mistletoe** is a semi-parasitic plant. It manufactures its own food, but must obtain water and minerals from the host plant. American mistletoe, *Phoradendron serotinum*, grows in deciduous trees from New Jersey southward to Florida and Texas. Mistletoe sold during the holiday season is gathered in the wild. Most mistletoe is harvested in Oklahoma and Texas. Mistletoe has been used in the treatment of several ailments, including pleurisy, gout, epilepsy, rabies, and poisoning. However, its white berries, which appear in winter, are poisonous. For safety reasons, the live berries are often replaced with artificial, plastic berries.

**Holly**, *Ilex spp.*, is a low-growing evergreen used for decorating at Christmas. Male and female flowers, on separate bushes, must be grown to obtain the scarlet berries, which persist all winter on the female plant.

**Bittersweet**, *Celastrus scandens*, is grown for its ornamental fruit, which are used in floral arrangements and winter wreaths. This plant is most effective as an ornamental in the autumn and winter as the leaves turn golden yellow and the seed pods break open to reveal bright red berries.

**Jerusalem cherry**, *Solanum pseudocapsicum*, has care needs similar to the Christmas peppers. It bears starlike 1/2-inch white flowers from July to September, followed by round orange-scarlet or yellow berries. The berries are not cherries at all, and are poisonous--so keep them well away from children. The fruit may cling to the plant for two months if kept in an environment of 50° to 60° F. during the day and at 45° to 55° F. at night.

Other popular holiday gift plants that may be harmful if ingested include:

<b>Plant</b>	<b>Hazardous Parts</b>
Crown-of-thorns	Stems
Dieffenbachia	All parts
Ficus (fig)	Milky sap causes skin reaction
Hyacinth	Bulb
Philodendron	All parts

To be on the safe side, keep holiday plants out of reach of children and pets. Remember to pick up and dispose of all leaves or berries that fall from your plant. Christmas trees are also a problem. The needles, even though they are not poisonous, are a choking hazard.

The West Virginia Poison Control Center's reports that plant poisoning or choking calls account for 3 percent of their calls. This includes all ages. Many plants contain toxic substances and these substances cause a variety of symptoms from mild stomach ache, skin rash, swelling of the mouth and throat to involvement of the heart, kidneys, and other organs. The level of toxicity for a particular chemical substance is

relative to the body mass, the amount ingested and/or the rate of ingestion.

Some safety rules to follow in regard to plants include:

1. Never eat any part of an unknown plant.
2. Never chew on jewelry, etc., made from plant material or allow children to do so.
3. Never attempt to make your own "nature tea" unless you are positive of the plant you are using and the recipe.
4. Make sure the herbs you grow are edible and safe.
5. Never allow children to play around plants without supervision.
6. Store seeds, bulbs, tubers, etc., out of the reach of children.

In the event of poisoning or suspected poisoning, call the poison control center nearest you or the West Virginia Poison Center.

West Virginia Poison Center  
 3110 MacCorkle Avenue, S.E.  
 Charleston, WV 25304  
 Emergency Phone: (800) 642-3625 [WV only];  
 (304) 348-4211