

RAE NARASIMHAN '04

One of crooner Andy Williams' number one seasonal hits contained the line... "It's the most wonderful time of the year." Originally meant to describe the holiday activities, the lyric also can represent a time of rest for both garden and gardener. By now, outdoor plants have been protected with netting, burlap and other methods against winter's cold and drying winds. Favorite houseplants that summered outdoors are inside and now have different requirements. For instance, tropical plants benefit from more light, possibly a bit of direct sunlight. Ferns, orchids and certain begonias prefer indirect, bright light. Plant labels can be helpful by listing water and light needs and whether or not to fertilize. By paying careful attention to these requirements and following a schedule, your chances of maintaining healthy houseplants increase enormously.

Holiday favorites such as Poinsettias, Amaryllis and Christmas Cactus (botanically known as Schlumbergera bridgessii or Zygocactus) are colorful additions to the home.

**Poinsettia:** Considered the mainstay of many Christmas decorations, it comes in a wide array of colors. If kept in a cool spot but out of drafts, it lasts long past the holiday season. Give it bright, indirect light, and water when the soil starts to feel dry. As with most houseplants, avoid overwatering, and drain the saucer to avoid root rot.

**Amaryllis:** After flowering, trim the old flowers, and cut back the sagging stem to the top of the bulb. When summer rolls around again, bring the plant outdoors and continue to water and fertilize for at least 5-6 months, allowing the leaves to fully develop and grow.

**Christmas/Zygocactus:** Watering correctly is the key to its survival. A good procedure to follow is to water the plant thoroughly, and allow about the top inch of soil to dry out before watering again. During the winter months, water less frequently in order to get it to bloom. When considering how to care for Christmas cactus, keep in mind it also prefers temperatures hovering between 60 and 70 degrees F, with average to high humidity levels. Placing a tray of pebbles filled with water beneath the Christmas cactus container is a good way to add more humidity to the plants.

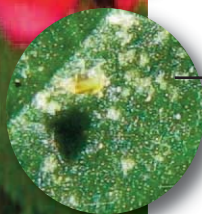
Check your houseplants for pests and diseases. Even if houseplants are sprayed with insecticide before bringing them indoors, all it takes is a few surviving insect pests to multiply and rapidly spread to other plants. Some common pests are scale, whiteflies, spider mites, aphids, mealy bugs, fungus gnats and thrips.



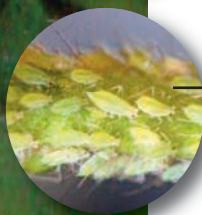
**Scales** are 'non-insect' looking insects. Various color scales, shaped like oval or round bumps, adhere to leaves and stems. Sticky sap on the plant or on surfaces below, is the first sign of scale.



**Whiteflies** are tiny, white insects that fly from plants when disturbed. This flight process makes them difficult to control.



**Spider mites** are the size of a speck of dust and suck sap from plant tissues. They may cause drying or fading of leaves. Fine webs may be visible with heavy infestations.



**Aphids** are often confused with white flies, but they can be of various colors—white, green or brown. Very small in size (1/16 to 1/8 inch), they are slow-moving and cluster along stems and hide under leaves.



**Mealy Bugs** resemble minute bits of cotton and cluster in leaf axils or other places on the plant.



**Fungus gnats** are tiny, dark flies that hover around plants. The white larvae of these gnats can damage plant roots.



**Thrips** are extremely small, flat, elongated insects that are fast-moving and can cause streaking, fading and drying of plant tissues. Take quick action before they become a major problem.

*NOTE: For house plants with pest infestations, refer to publications from 'edu' sites and Extension Service sites for treatment information. Follow all guidelines and safety procedures when using any form of pesticide, whether organic or inorganic.*

