

Gardening Articles for week ending November 28th 2015

Written by Wally Richards. [Photo]

CHRISTMAS PLANTS

There are a few plants that are traditionally associated with Xmas making this an appropriate time to have a wee look at them.

Holly and mistletoe are two greenery plants that were used in days gone by during the festive season.

Holly is still widely used as imitation holly in Xmas wreaths.

In Pagan times the English had the "he holly and the she holly" being the determining factor in who will rule the household in the following year. The "she holly" have smooth leaves and the "he holly" prickly ones.

A word of caution here if you hang a Xmas imitation holly Wreath on your door you are advertising who will rule the home for the coming year..

Mistletoe also had its beginnings in the past and may still be hung from the ceiling by some people.

When in vogue if you met someone of the opposite sex under the mistletoe you were to kiss.

In the 18th Century, the exchanging of kisses between a man and a woman was adopted as a promise to marry. At Christmas a young lady standing under a ball of mistletoe cannot refuse to be kissed.

The kiss could mean deep romance, lasting friendship and goodwill. It was believed that if the girl remained unknissed, she cannot expect to marry the following year.

(From Wikipedia) The custom of the Christmas tree developed in early modern Germany (where it is today called Weihnachtsbaum or Christbaum or "Tannenbaum") with predecessors that can be traced to the 16th and possibly 15th century, in which devout Christians brought decorated trees into their homes.

It acquired popularity beyond Germany during the second half of the 19th century, at first among the upper classes.

The tree was traditionally decorated with edibles such as apples, nuts, or other foods. In the 18th century, it began to be illuminated by candles which were ultimately replaced by Christmas lights after the advent of electrification.

Today, there are a wide variety of traditional ornaments, such as garland, tinsel, and candy canes. An angel or star might be placed at the top of the tree to represent the archangel Gabriel or the Star of Bethlehem from the Nativity.

If I remember rightly in America there was a tradition of stringing popcorn to decorate the Xmas tree.

Pine tree branches or tops in NZ are still popular with some households and they certainly bring in a fresh pine fragrance into the home for a time. They also drop their needles after a while and a bit of a job to clean up in the New Year.

Placing the base of the pine into a bucket of wet sand will help the tree to last longer and some say an aspirin added to the water will also help preserve. Even better is to not only dissolve an aspirin or two in water but also add a tablespoon or two of sugar and a little bleach.

The artificial Xmas Trees suit more people these days and they are easily recycled for use in Xmas to come. Types include artificial pine and yule trees and colours such as greens, white, pink, red, purple, yellow and black.

This year my partner has opt for a black tree with white, red and blue decorations while previous years trees of different colours are in their boxes in storage.

Xmas lilies are one of the two most popular flowering plants for Christmas.

They flower around about the Xmas period and are sought out by many to decorate their indoor vases as well as outdoor settings. Long lasting in a vase especially if you use the aspirin/sugar/bleach in the vase water.

I had a phone call from a retired gentleman this week complaining that his Xmas Lilly plants were not preforming and likely he would have very few flowers or none at all this Xmas.

I asked him if in previous Xmas had he picked the flower stems for indoors and the answer was yes, with nice long stems. That is the problem I told him, by cutting nice long stems leaves very little leaves are left on the plant to gain energy from the sun for the following year's flowering.

Short stems leaving ample leaves behind will ensure reasonable flowering the following year.

I told him about another retired farmer that had a long driveway with Xmas Lillies planted on both sides of the drive. Each year he would cut the flowers and sell them to the local florist for his Xmas pocket money. At about 50cents a stem and so many lilies flowering he could have a deposit for a BMW.

Unfortunately because too many flower stems had been cut too long over a few Xmas periods he ended up with only sufficient pocket money for a dozen beers.

The answer in his case was to only cut one third of the flowers each year allowing the other two thirds a couple of years to recover.

For those of us that dont want to buy cut Xmas Lily flowers every year instead have a look around your garden centres for some potted Xmas Lilies. These will likely be one bulb in a small container.

Buy three of them and a large container where the 3 plants can be planted while allowing for room

to expand. Use a nice purchased compost to pot them up and use some Rok Solid and Sheep Manure pellets under the plants.

Leave outside where they will get a few hours of sun light each day and keep the mix moist. As the buds start to open bring the tub indoors and place on a large saucer or tray for catching excess water.

If possible position in front of a morning or afternoon sun window. The tub can be moved to a centre point for display when guests are due and later put back into the better light.

Once flowering is finished take the tub outside and place in a sheltered shady spot for a few days to harden up. Then into a full sun area till next Xmas. Every Three years re pot and the smaller new bulbs can either also go into pots or your garden. Ideal food to water in occasionally would be Matrix with MBL added.

Poinsettia with their lovely red bracts are a favorite of many at Xmas time.

(*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) is a culturally and commercially important plant species of the diverse spurge family that is indigenous to Mexico and Central America. It is particularly well known for its red and green foliage and is widely used in Christmas floral displays.

The red bracts (leaves) are not the flowers; the flowers are those insignificant berry looking things in the middle of the young red bracts.

Later these flowers will fall off unless fertilised/pollinated leaving the leaves in their red colour for several weeks. They need a good light situation so make sure they spend most of the time within a metre of a sunny window. Dont over water as they dont like wet feet.

The plants you buy have been treated with a dwarfing compound to make them squat. Later as this effect wears off they will become much taller and scraggy looking. I have seen poinsettia planted outdoors in a frost free, sunny, free draining situation where they will grow about as tall as your home and put on an excellent display of red leaves in winter.

To make them flower its light control, 8 hours of good light and 16 hours of darkness for a couple of weeks or until the top leaves start to turn red. In a room without bright lights in winter they will flower without any help from you.

If you want a neat flowering plant to give as a gift buy a Moth Orchid (*Phalaenopsis*) if looked after correctly they will flower for months even in some cases always having some flowers.