

Make Plans for Holiday Plant Materials

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Thanksgiving is this Thursday and is fairly late in the month this year. This usually signals that as soon as we get through Thanksgiving Day, many households will start rushing to get the Christmas Tree up and decorated followed by some poinsettias and maybe even some evergreen garlands around the inside of the house. You're going to spend some hard earned money on these plant materials and just a few simple steps can help you get the most out of them and also keep you and your family safe.

Obviously if your Christmas tree and evergreen decorations come out of a box in the attic, a lot of this simply won't apply to you. For all of you that have a live tree and fresh decorating materials you need to remember that these evergreens have very high resin content in addition to the sap. The resin can ooze out of wounds and be sticky when fresh and hardens to a somewhat solid state. Resin is also highly flammable. As any evergreen dries down the high water content sap escapes from the tree and what you are left with is the flammable resin. All evergreens have resin.

A real Christmas tree needs to be as fresh as possible and then put in a tree stand and kept well filled with water. Before putting the tree in the stand, even if you just cut it down a few hours before at a tree farm, you want to cut off about a half inch of the base to remove the resin that has already flowed out and started to harden. If you don't cut off that slice of trunk the tree may very well not take up water. Various products have been added to the water to keep the tree fresher longer, but ultimately it comes down to just keeping water in the stand.

For greenery there's no way to use it and keep it fresh with water. Don't put it up inside the house until the last minute and keep it cool and in the dark prior to that time to reduce how fast it dries out. With both the tree and fresh greenery, never use candles or lanterns or anything with an open flame near it. Use Christmas tree lights that are low heat (LEDs are wonderful) and use the new LED flicker lights that do look like candles. Same effect but very low fire risk! I also encourage taking down greenery inside the home as soon after Christmas as possible.

Holly and mistletoe are two other types of greenery that are commonly used for indoor holiday decorating. While not loaded with resin like the evergreens, caution still needs to be maintained as they can get quite dry. The other concern though has to be health and safety. American mistletoe, despite years of tradition, does not appear to have poisonous berries. European mistletoe is a different plant and does have poisonous berries. However, the bright red holly berries are quite toxic and one would do well to remove the berries if in a household with pets or children. In fact, it's always best to just not use anything with berries for decorating when there are children and pets in the home.

Lastly, poinsettias. They have an amazing history that I have discussed in past years. Poinsettias are not poisonous but they are sensitive to cold drafts and wet or dry soils. If it's below 50 degrees when you purchase your poinsettia make sure it is wrapped when you leave the store and the car should be warm. Place it somewhere to avoid cool or warm drafts. Make sure water drains out of the pot freely as wet soil causes root rot. Check the soil daily and water when dry to the touch. If the plant wilts even just a little it'll likely lose all of it's green leaves and you'll be left with a few colored leaves/bracts at the top and stems!