

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
Date: December 14, 2003  
Contact: WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension: 428-4270

Christmas is a favorite time of the year for lots of folks and they enjoy going all out to decorate both inside and outside their homes. Here are a few helpful hints that may prevent a few problems.

How safe are our Christmas plants?

Poinsettia - nonpoisonous, however both leaves and bracts (flowers) produce a milky sap that can cause skin irritations to those that are sensitive to it. Also, young children can get it on their hands and rub it in their eyes. So, keep them up and out of the reach of small children.

Holly - the American Medical Association's Handbook of Poisonous and Injurious Plants states that the leaves are nonpoisonous, but the berries are poisonous and can cause nausea, vomiting and occasionally diarrhea. If you wish to use holly and the berries keep them out of the reach of young children and curious pets. Remember leaves have sharp points.

Mistletoe - most all store-bought mistletoe has plastic berries because the real berries are harmful causing severe stomach and intestinal irritation.

Christmas peppers - These plants are not toxic; however, they are extremely HOT. These peppers can be very bright and colorful, so grandparents; if you have small children coming to visit, please put these plants way up high.

Jerusalem cherry - unripe fruit is thought to cause vomiting and diarrhea.

All of these plants are beautiful and can be used to decorate, but please use a bit of caution.

A few other thoughts; candles look beautiful surrounded with fragrant pine boughs and other greenery in all those glossy magazines that arrive this time of year. But these decorations can also be a fire hazard. Please do not leave any lit candle unattended. Keep your tree in water and don't let the reservoir dry out. If the end of the trunk dries out, it will seal over and won't be able to absorb water and, of course, this will cause the whole tree to dry out and the needles will fall off. Before you set up your tree inside, cut off one to two inches from the trunk and set the tree in warm water. A six foot tree will use up one half gallon of water the first day. Plain water is as good as anything for the tree. Keep it away from all heat sources and don't leave the lights on all night long. It lessens the chance of fire and is a bit easier on the electric bill. Check light cords for fraying.

Last of all, have a wonderful and safe holiday season from all the WSU/Skagit County Master Gardeners.

The information provided in this newsrelease is for education purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names is made with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by Cooperative Extension is implied. Cooperative Extension programs and employment are available to all without discrimination.

This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.