

Keep Holiday Plant Material Fresh

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

December, with all its holidays, likely sees more fresh plant material brought into homes for decoration than at any other time of year. My house is no exception with a live Christmas tree, poinsettia(s) and other miscellaneous greenery. There is nothing like the smell of a fresh real Christmas tree to make it truly seem like the holidays! The problem is that much of this plant material is evergreen in nature. Evergreens have a lot of resins and oils in their sap and as the moisture slowly, or not so slowly, leaves this foliage the resins remain and these resins are flammable and I mean HIGHLY flammable. So extra care must be taken at this time of year!

Christmas trees are the biggest piece of greenery in the house and also the easiest to keep fresh. Buy as fresh a tree as possible to begin with. Fresh cut is preferred but there are too few cut your own operations around our area. When you buy a pre-cut tree bend some needles in your fingers. If the needles snap instead of bending, keep looking! As soon as you get it home get into the stand or at least into a bucket of water AFTER you cut a half inch or so off the bottom of the trunk. When Christmas trees are cut sap oozes out that cut surface and quickly dries, sealing over the vessels that can take up water. Cutting off the bottom of the trunk exposes fresh water transport vessels (xylem) that can then readily move water to the rest of the tree. Check the water in the tree stand several times a day, especially the first few days. You may have to add water two to three times a day. Never let the water level drop below the level of the end of the trunk as it may reseal then. Then remove the tree from the house as soon as possible after the holidays.

Evergreen greenery, in the form of a wreath, swags, or just lying loose, present a special challenge as unlike Christmas trees, these do not have a water reservoir to draw from. By the time they have been in the house a week to ten days, they can become quite dry. I encourage people to consider buying a couple of sets of greenery and replacing them when they get old. All of these decorations need to be out of the house immediately after Christmas as they are such a fire hazard.

Greenery like holly, winterberry (a type of holly), even mistletoe will also dry out but do so more slowly and do not have the highly flammable resins the pine, spruce, fir or juniper have. Usually you just need one set of these greens as they hold up so much better as they dry down. You also need to be aware that all parts of mistletoe are poisonous so it should be kept away from children and pets. It may not be deadly, but it can make you or your pets sick if ingested!

Poinsettias are the other common plant material we have in our homes during the holidays. Poinsettias are sensitive to hot or cold drafts so keep them away from furnace vents, doors and windows. If the pot is wrapped in foil punch holes in the foil at the bottom and place on a saucer so water drains out. Poinsettias can quickly develop rot root otherwise. Check the soil daily and do not let the plant dry out. If it wilts you'll quickly lose leaves and wind up with a naked stem.

The final thing to keep in mind should be common sense but needs to be mentioned anyway. Do not use any real flames, such as candles or lanterns, near holiday greenery. While it may look festive it is just too great of a fire risk. Consider using the faux candles with flickering LED lights. You obtain nearly the same effect without the risk of fire. We want everyone to have a safe and wonderful holiday season!