

Green and growing Holiday plants do double duty

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Holiday plants, with their showy flowers and/or interesting fruits, are a joy to give and a pleasure to receive, aren't they? They're great for those with hurrupitis who want to refresh interiors instantly, too.

Some of these colorful decorations are to be enjoyed temporarily; others can become permanent decorative accents. Try not to purchase them too far ahead of time and, to maximize your enjoyment, choose those which are brimming with buds showing color over those in full flower.

The poinsettia, harbinger of Christmas, is a perfect example of a plant that is dressed to the nines. Massing several small ones on a raised platform in a basket can give that come-on-in feeling to a room. And to savor the loveliness of a large one, just place in a low position on the floor or suspend in the air.

The Art of Entertaining, published in 1927 and written by Jean Walden, contains a plethora of delightful thoughts. One Christmas idea, for example, was to submerge one stemless, large, red, poinsettia flower in

water inside a pale green, glass or crystal bowl. Place tall red candles at either end of the centerpiece for added flourish.

The Christmas cactus is a hassle-free houseplant that can be kept contented in rooms we are comfortable in. With proper care, it can achieve quite a size over the years. And the drooping flowers at the tips of pendulous stems are a cinch to add sparkle anywhere. But newly-formed buds may drop if the light direction is changed and even a quarter-turn of the pot can result in some bud loss.

This houseplant, contrary to its name, is a succulent and not a cactus. Keep the soil evenly moist, but not wet, and don't allow it to totally dry out. Insects rarely bug this one.

Keeping both varieties in tip-top shape isn't difficult. Just provide bright light and let them bask in as much winter sun as possible. Remove any foil wrapping around the pot to allow for proper drainage.

All gift plants will languish in stuffy, overheated rooms or near drafts and heat sources so try to give them a cool room, at least in the evening. If you place them on a windowsill make sure there is

elbow room so foliage isn't touching cold glass panes.

And if house temperatures drop five degrees at night, so much the better—the plants will benefit and you'll save money on the heating bill.

Happy holidays and happy gardening.

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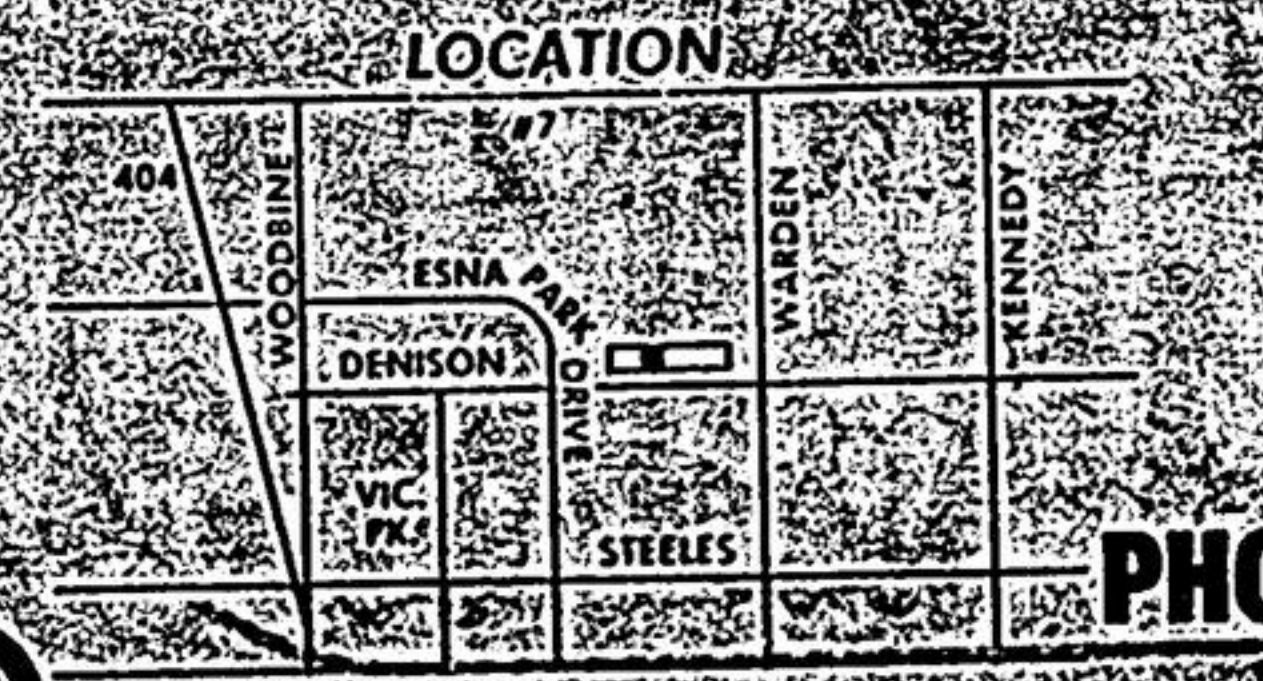
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Guilt trips are no pleasure cruises

If there's one emotion I'd like to see eliminated, it's guilt.

I don't mean the essential kind, which stops people doing nasty things to each other and without which we'd have anarchy. I mean the kind which wakes you up at 3 a.m. and reminds you that you still haven't written your mother-in-law.

Because I never do things until I'm driven to, I'm absolutely loaded down with guilt. For a long time I felt guilty because I hadn't been to the dentist regularly.

This guilt became a millstone once I had children, because I knew I'd have to take them and the game would be up. It wasn't even fear of pain, it was the embarrassment of having left it so long.

Luckily, I found a dentist who was kind and understanding, and who didn't have a fantastically efficient Margaret Thatcher-type hygienist with teeth like the Osmonds, demanding to know why I hadn't been flossing regularly.

Now I almost look forward to my six-month check-up, as long as I don't forget all about it, as I did in the summer when I was far away in England.

The dentist's office phoned to reschedule, but I was away again, and then, because I felt guilty, I didn't phone back for ages.

Eventually, the guilt of not going regularly overcame the guilt of missing the appointment, and I made the call. Now I'm relaxed and untroubled when conversations turn to teeth.

I'm always reading articles about how regular medical check-ups are an essential part of staying healthy, and I know they're right.

Somehow, though, I can't bring myself to make an appointment unless I'm at death's door, and even then the sight of a doctor is usually enough to make my symptoms disappear completely. Then I feel guilty for wasting his time.

Christmas is just one big guilt trip for me. I always send my cards out late, and have just heave a huge sigh of relief at a job finally done when I find my mailbox piled high with cards from people I forgot.

Then I either rush around looking for more cards to send them, knowing they won't arrive until about Jan. 12, or live with the guilt of not reciprocating.

In fact, the whole of December is a nightmare of guilt. I never get my shopping done on time, and there's always someone I didn't buy for who gives me something.

Just as I'm learning to live with myself again, in come the credit card bills, with all those last minute extras I'd forgotten about, which assume a nasty significance once the season to be jolly is over.

It's surprising how fast Christmas and New Year celebrations give way to the gloom and doom of April 30.

The only reason I'm not making any New Year's resolutions for 1990 is that I just can't handle the guilt which will result when I inevitably fail to live up to them.