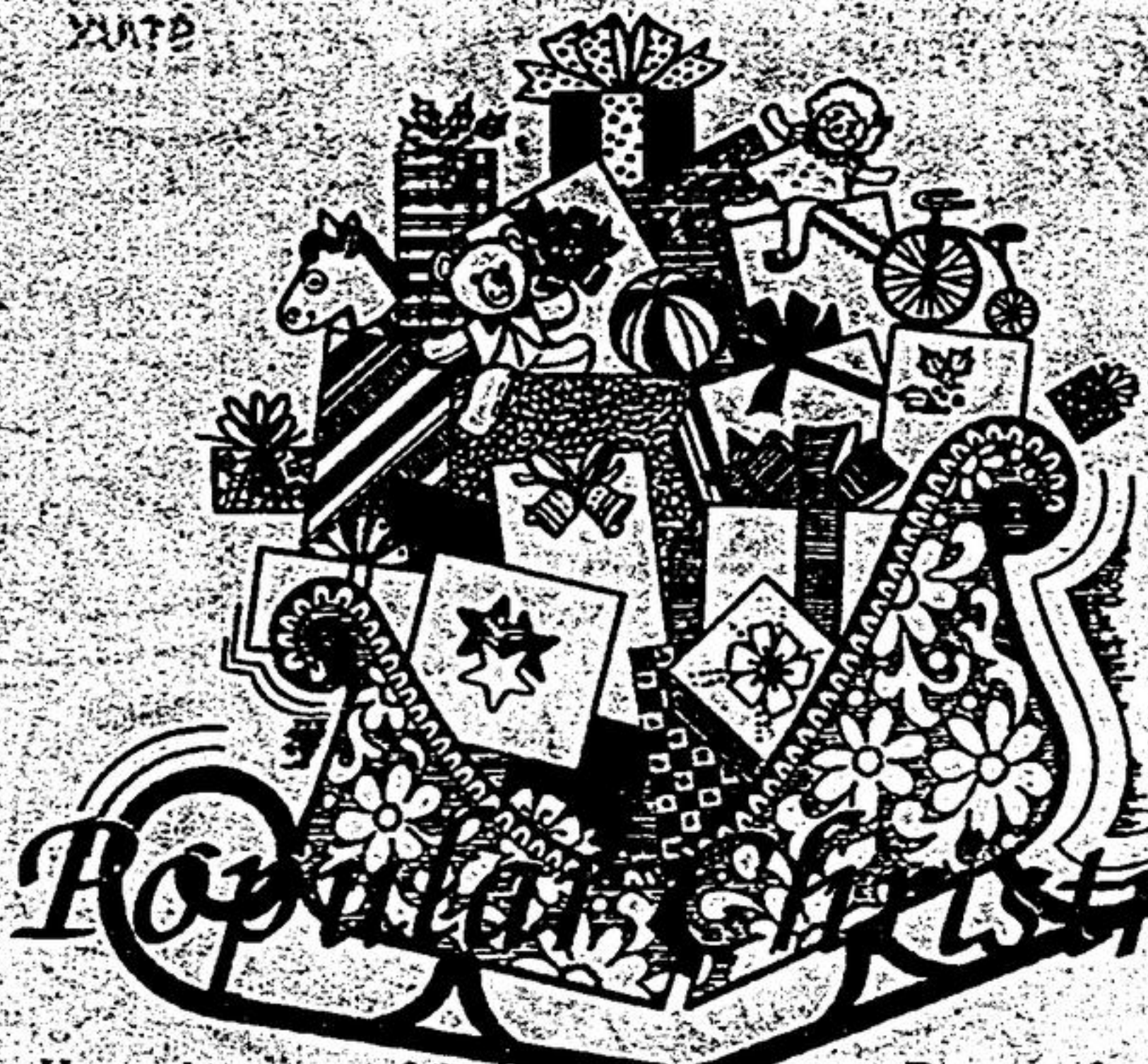


WATD



Last Minute Gift Ideas

Popular Christmas plants need some special care

Houseplants are a favorite gift at Christmas. But too often the houseplant finds itself center stage in an overheated, stuffy room, unwatered in the haste of the Christmas celebrations and looking a bit sick by New Year's Eve. Here are a few favorites to give as Christmas gifts and some tips on how to care for them.

CYCLAMEN - Popular for its colorful and elegant swept-back blooms, but likely to die quickly if not placed in a cool and bright position. It likes humidity, too. Rather than spraying, however, it is best stood on a pot tray or saucer containing a bed of gravel covered with water. This will ensure a moist surrounding to the plant.

POT CHRYSANTHEMUMS - When buying, choose one with lots of buds about to open. When receiving, avoid placing them in a hot room. They prefer some sun and should be misted regularly. Don't throw the plant away after the blooms and foliage start to fade. They can be made to grow again in the garden, although they are no longer suitable for potting.

AZALEAS - Often forced to bloom for Christmas and notoriously tricky to keep alive. They like a cool, light place but hate direct sun and drafts. Mist them every day and keep compost damp - use soft water or rain water if possible - but be warned that it is also possible to over-water.

This is usually indicated by buds refusing to open. On the other hand, falling leaves mean too little water.

POINSETTIA - Arguably the most popular Christmas houseplant, but it can be difficult. It likes light and warmth (above 55F), damp compost and daily misting, but hates drafts. Unfortunately, if you do get the conditions wrong, the colored bracts, which are the plant's highlight, can quickly flutter earthwards with no prospect of growing replacements until the next year.

Far too many people dump their poinsettia after Christmas, but the plant can be cut back to leave stumps of about four inches and then placed somewhere dry, warm and shaded.

WINTER CHERRY - Often mistaken for some kind of orange with its little round fruit and green foliage. It likes a sunny location in a cool room and must be kept moist through watering and misting.

Don't overwater though, or the leaves will quickly fall. Keep children away from the berries - they are poisonous.

KALANCHOE - If you have doubts about having any plants at Christmas, then the Kalanchoe is for you. It's a succulent plant with pretty flowers and needs minimal watering.

It prefers a sunny place in a cool room and likes to be wiped with a damp cloth every week or so to keep it looking good. It is fairly easy to care for.

CHRISTMAS CACTUS - Another favorite; it boasts a mass of spectacular blooms, yet only demands a cool spot and watering when the compost dries out. With minimal effort it can also be coaxed into blooming again next Christmas.



Plants make a wonderful gift for Christmas and with a little extra attention, they can last much past the holiday season.

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