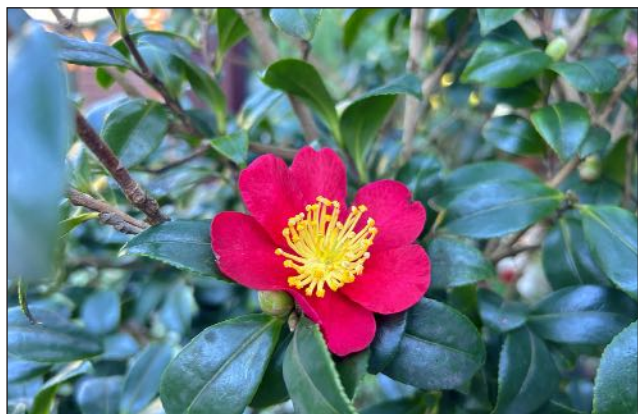


The Driftwood Garden Diary

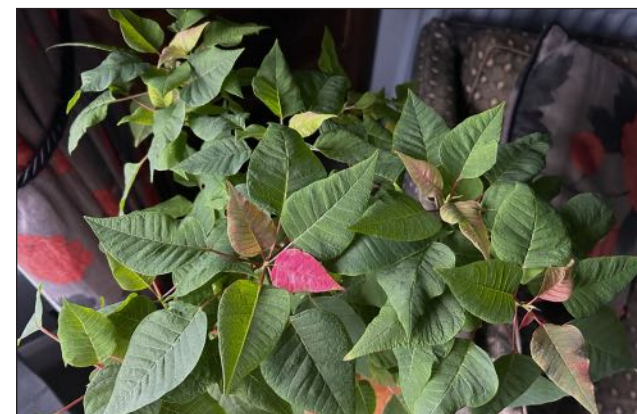
with Geoff Stonebanks



Camellia Yuletide will flower for up to four months



Christmas cacti are often handed down through generations



My poinsettia is now three years old

Three of my favourite plants to enjoy for the festive season

IT is certainly beginning to look a lot like Christmas in the garden at Driftwood as I get on with jobs out there. I bought a small potted tree a few years ago and this is its third year on display at the back of the house. Mine has always been left outside and decorated with lights and a few weatherproof baubles as you can see.

You can generally keep a tree in its container until it gets to about six foot in height. It is very important to make sure the pot you're using is big enough to contain all the roots comfortably, and then repot when roots start poking out. Even if you decide to bring your tree indoors for the festivities, it can provide valuable height and interest to the garden and patio area throughout the year. Pot-grown trees can generally tolerate being inside for up to two weeks, so that's 50 weeks of the year you can have a striking evergreen growing in the garden. I reckon I am going to have to have a plan "B" this spring, as mine is fast approaching six feet tall, so is going to need to be planted in the ground if it is to survive. Digging up and potting a tree you have growing in the garden already can be really tricky, so if you plan to bring your tree into the home again next Christmas, it's probably best to keep it in the container. However, when the tree outgrows pots, as mine is beginning to do, the garden is by far the best place for it.

The experts say choose a bright spot, sheltered from strong winds and out of direct sunlight. Dig a hole that is slightly deeper and wider than the tree's root ball. Remove the tree from its container, carefully tease the roots out a little, and position it in the centre of the hole. When filling the hole with compost, ensure the soil reaches the same level it did in the pot. Don't be tempted to transfer your tree too early in the year. The tree won't settle well in frosty or water-logged soil, so wait for a dry spell before replanting.

Three of my favourite Christmas plants, one outdoors and two indoors are camellia

Yuletide, Christmas cacti and poinsettia.

My camellia Yuletide is already dazzling at the back of the house. The flowers will flamboyantly cover the glossy, dark green foliage for up to four months and are further enhanced by a crown of golden stamen to the centre. The plant is native to both China and Japan and was introduced to Europe in the early 1800s, becoming ever popular over the generations. Their flowers are smaller, yet equally as prolific as other camellias and form generous trees or shrubs, dependent upon variety and pruning, though their natural shape is pyramidal. It matures to a height of about three metres, with a spread of 2.5 metres. Camellia sasanqua 'Yuletide' prefers to be planted in moist, well-drained soil of any kind except chalk based, in a spot in full sun or partial shade. It is a hardy evergreen shrub which should not need additional winter protection throughout most of the UK, although flowers may be damaged by frost in exposed sites.

Christmas cacti, or Schlumbergera, flower over the Christmas period, from late November to January and they can make excellent Christmas gifts. Their bright, trumpet-shaped flowers in shades of red, white, pink, purple and even yellow can bring a pretty, welcome splash of colour to any room and can look attractive all year round. Schlumbergera grow as forest cacti in the wild, they are found in tropical rainforests, where they grow attached to trees. This means they need different growing conditions to desert cacti. They don't like bright sunlight and appreciate being in a humid environment, in which case they should flower every year. The plants can last for years and are often handed down through generations. I have one that dates back to the 1950s that belonged to my paternal grandparents, then my father's sister and now, since 2004, me!

The third is a poinsettia, proper name *Euphorbia pulcherrima*. It



Trees can stay in a container until they reach about six feet in height

is an attractive house plant with dark green leaves and leafy red "bracts" that surround the green-yellow flowers in December and January. Native to Mexico, poinsettias can be tricky to keep alive after Christmas and most are thrown away after the red bracts have faded and the festivities have ended. However, with a little care and attention it's possible to keep your poinsettia alive throughout the year and even encourage red bracts and flowers to form in time for the following Christmas. The one pictured is now three years old and just beginning to turn red.

■ **Read more of Geoff's garden at www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk or view his Christmas decorations at www.geoffschristmas.co.uk**



Relocating a sculpture