



Christmas Flowers Around the World

by Marilyn Loser

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The Thanksgiving dishes are done and my thoughts turn to Christmas color. Last year, in this column (check out the News tab at AlamosaFlowers.net), I wrote about red flowers – especially two we associate with the season – Poinsettias and Amaryllis.

But there are so many more flowers and plants used in Christmas traditions around the world. I know quite a few people who have Christmas cactus. It's usually red and is also known as orchid cactus. It often blooms around Christmas time, although I see occasional posts from folks saying their Christmas cactus bloomed during the summer. It has pendulous stems and the blossoms hang down making it a great choice for hanging baskets.

While a variety of plants are sold as Christmas cactus, most are from the small genus *Schlumbergera* originating in the coastal mountains of south-eastern Brazil. In the wild, the species grow either on trees or on rocks and tend to bloom in May – *Flor de Maio*. The ones I've seen don't have sharp prickles like their desert-dwelling cousins. Over the years many cultivars have been developed with flowers of many colors.

I only had Paper Whites (*Narcissus tazetta*) once, but I associate them with Christmas as I've seen them in friends' homes. Native to Europe and Asia, these aromatic, small-flowered plants belong to the jonquil cultivar and are grown around the world. Apparently, they are easy to force. They don't require a chilling period like many other narcissus.

Forcing them only requires putting the bulbs in water and waiting. Place them in a container that is about 4 inches deep and add an inch or two of clean stones. Place the bulbs on the stones, pointed end up, and cover the bulbs with more stones making sure their tips are showing. Add enough water so the bases of the bulbs are submerged. Once you see roots developing, place them in a sunny location. I really need to do this again!

Mistletoe is a Christmas plant whose origin is said to date back to the pagans, according to Wikipedia. Druid priests used this Christmas plant two hundred years before the birth of Christ in their winter celebrations. But where did the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe come from? Some claim that the origin of the tradition goes back to ancient Norse mythology. A goddess named Frigg had a son and she made all plants unable to hurt him – all but one plant that she overlooked, the mistletoe. The mischief god Loke tricked another god into killing the son with a mistletoe spear. The son was brought back to life and Frigg declared that mistletoe would bring love rather than death into the world.

There are other theories, but all seem to involve love, healing, the promotion of fertility, and aphrodisiac powers. More recently in England, when a young man kissed a woman standing under the mistletoe, he would pluck a berry from the bush after each kiss. After all the berries were gone, it was bad luck to continue kissing under that bush. Wikipedia reports that “It is important to remember that during this period a kiss was taken very seriously - it was usually seen as a promise of marriage.”

Holly is the plant most associated with Christmas in many European countries. Holly is a genus of more than 500 species, but it is the European holly, *Ilex aquifolium* generally referred to at Christmas – It is often referred to by the name “Christ’s thorn.” Holly wreaths are hung on doors, and sprigs of holly used to trim Christmas puddings.

Ivy has been associated with the Egyptian God, Osiris, and the Greco-Roman god, Attis, both of whom were resurrected from the dead. The leaves symbolize eternity and resurrection.

Along with holly, ivy has carried Christian symbolism, as expressed in the Christmas carol “The Holly and the Ivy”, in which the holly represents Jesus and the ivy represents the Virgin Mary according to Wikipedia.

In New Zealand, the pohutukawa tree is often associated with Christmas, as its bright red flowers usually appear in December. Renowned for its vibrant color and its ability to survive even perched on rocky, precarious cliffs, it has found an important place in New Zealand culture for its strength and beauty and is regarded as a chiefly tree by the native Maori.

“I perhaps owe having become a painter to flowers.” Claude Monet