

## Holiday Decorating with Little Ones in Mind

By Susan Camp

Phrases frequently heard in our home during the holiday season include, “Shadow, get down” and “How long before he knocks that over?” Shadow is our lively, young tuxedo cat. He loves to run and jump and play. He samples everything with his mouth, just like a two-year-old child. Holiday decorations in our house are in peril of being pulled from tabletops, torn to shreds, and eaten by this eleven pound whirlwind. To be fair to Shadow, little damage has occurred; my husband and I try to keep breakables out of his reach and use a minimum of live greenery in decorations.

We have had experience with a naughty kitty. Our beloved Bilbo Baggins knocked the Christmas tree over at least once every season. Wooden ornaments saved us from a mess of broken glass. Bilbo munched my Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*) down to a nub every year, savoring each tender, delicious blossom. Fortunately, he never demonstrated adverse effects from eating the cactus. One Christmas Eve morning, Bilbo managed to reach a poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) that was on a high shelf. That meal led to a visit to the emergency veterinary clinic for a steroid injection and some soothing antacid. Poinsettia is not poisonous, but the sap may contain substances that irritate the mouth, throat, and gastrointestinal tract. Head-shaking and foaming at the mouth are clear indications of poinsettia sampling by pets, along with the scattered leaves and stems on the floor. According to a University of Illinois Extension publication, the results of a study conducted by Ohio State showed that a 50 pound child would have to eat at least 500 poinsettia leaves to demonstrate signs and symptoms of poisoning.

Most of the live plants we bring into the house during the holiday season, whether self-harvested or purchased at a garden center, have some properties that are irritating or possibly poisonous to pets and humans. Some purchased plants come with warning labels; all potentially poisonous plants should be labeled.

English ivy (*Hedera helix*) is used in floral arrangements and holiday wreaths. Although English ivy has a long history of medicinal use, its berries are poisonous and the leaves can cause skin irritation and allergic reaction.

Many of us living on the Middle Peninsula have American holly (*Ilex opaca*) trees growing in our woods, from which we cut branches for holiday decorations. Like English ivy, holly has been used for centuries for its medicinal properties, but its berries, like those of the winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), are poisonous.

Another traditional holiday plant is mistletoe. The American variety of mistletoe (*Phoradendron serotinum*) is reputed to be less toxic than its European counterpart, according to [www.petpoisonhelpline.com](http://www.petpoisonhelpline.com), but can cause severe illness in humans, dogs, and cats. All parts of

the mistletoe plant are poisonous. Dress up your mistletoe Kissing Ball with a covering of tulle to prevent berries from dropping to the floor. No one wants to miss out on a Christmas kiss!

One of the loveliest winter-blooming plants is hellebore, also called Christmas rose (*Helleborus niger*). Unfortunately, the pretty flowers, which are often used in arrangements, contain chemicals that can slow the heart rate and other substances that can cause skin, mouth, and gastrointestinal irritation.

Besides these traditional holiday plants, there are other seasonal dangers for small children and pets. Live Christmas trees and wreaths may have been sprayed with preservatives to prevent drying and to prolong indoor life. Artificial snow and berries could present a choking hazard. Broken glass ornaments, angel hair, candles, and electrical wires can cause serious injury to curious children and our furry friends.

The holiday season is a special time of year. A little forethought and care taken with home decorations can prevent a trip to the local emergency department or veterinary clinic.

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