

# Selecting & Maintaining Poinsettias



A commercial poinsettia greenhouse range in late November

Poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) is the traditional flower associated with Christmas and the top-selling flowering potted plant in the United States. The brightly colored parts of the plant (called bracts) are actually modified leaves. The true flowers are the yellow bead-like structures in the center of the poinsettia (called cyathia). Poinsettias range from the traditional red to pink, white, peach, and bicolor. Hybridizers continue to develop more colorful, stronger cultivars that have longer-lasting bracts. If properly cared for, poinsettias may last several months indoors. These plants may display signs of stress at temperatures below 50 degrees, thus they are not the best candidates for outdoor displays.

## Choosing a Poinsettia

When purchasing poinsettias, select plants with these characteristics:

- Brightly colored bracts and unopened or partially opened yellow flowers (cyathia) in the center.
- Dark green foliage covering the stem to the soil line of the plant.

- Leaves and bracts showing no drooping or wilting.
- Leaves or bracts that are not faded, discolored, or torn.
- No evidence of whiteflies, aphids, or other pests on the undersides of the leaves.
- Plants that have not been kept in plastic sleeves for several days or longer.

## Care of Poinsettias during the Holidays

- Place the poinsettia in a bright location in the home where it can receive indirect light. Although it can withstand direct sunlight, watering requirements will increase and the flowers will not last as long.
- Keep poinsettias away from drafts, HVAC vents, and home heaters.
- Avoid letting the bracts touch cold windowpanes because the transfer of outdoor temperatures can cause damage.
- Keep the plant moist but not soggy. Overwatering is a major cause of early leaf and bract drop in poinsettias.



As shown in this Poinsettia 'Ice Punch,' the flowers (cyathia) are small and yellow. Cyathia are surrounded by smaller, modified leaves called bracts.

- Punch drainage holes in the bottom of the plastic decorator wrap or remove it for proper drainage.
- Place the plant on a drainage saucer.
- Water the plants thoroughly when needed until the water drains out into the saucer. Then pour off excess water so the potting soil will not become soggy.
- Maintain temperatures of 68 to 72 degrees during the day and around 60 to 65 degrees at night. Do not allow temperatures to drop below 50 degrees.
- Do not fertilize the plants when in flower.
- The soil of plants growing in 4-inch pots will dry faster than those in 6- or 8-inch pots. Take care to frequently check smaller poinsettia plants to keep up with water needs.
- Water only when needed; wait until soil is dry to water. Leaf drop is one symptom of overwatering.

### After-Christmas Care for Reblooming

With yearlong care, it is possible—although very challenging—for some varieties of poinsettias to reflower the following Christmas. For most of us, it is easier simply to discard the poinsettia after the holidays and purchase new plants that are professionally grown in greenhouses each year. However, if you are up to the challenge, the following information will help guide you.

Single-stemmed poinsettias, which are nonbranching, do not reflower well. It is best to discard them after blooming. Many of the new varieties of poinsettias have foliage and bracts that remain throughout the entire winter

and into spring. Continue to water and provide indirect light for these poinsettias with the same care as during the Christmas season. When the bracts begin to fade, let the soil in the pot dry, but do not let the stems shrivel. Keep the plant in a warm area as it becomes semidormant.

When all danger of frost has passed and night temperatures average 55 degrees or above, cut the poinsettia back to 6 to 8 inches in height. Remove the plant from the pot and repot in a larger container using a packaged potting mix, and place the container outdoors. Or you can plant it directly into a flowerbed. Either way, make sure you choose a wind-protected, sunny location with some protection from midday and afternoon sun.

Continue to provide water and begin fertilizing every 3 to 4 weeks with a well-balanced, complete fertilizer, such as a 10-5-10. Always follow package directions when using any fertilizer.

New growth should appear within 2 weeks of repotting or planting into the ground. Be sure to keep the plants moist during the hot, dry months of June, July, and August.

Pinching back or pruning of new growth will be required during the summer months to keep the plant compact and bushy. Depending on the rate of growth, you may need to cut back once a month, leaving four leaves on each shoot. Do not pinch or prune after September 1 because this can impact or delay flowering.



Poinsettia 'Autumn Leaves'



Poinsettia 'Orange Spice'

As danger of frost approaches, move the plant indoors or to a protective structure where it will get maximum sunlight during the day and a minimum temperature of 60 degrees at night.

Poinsettias are photoperiodic plants and respond to night length. You must artificially manage the environment to stimulate flowering, which naturally occurs around Christmas in their native Central America. To do this, protect them from the cold by moving indoors and providing the long, uninterrupted nights they require to bloom.

From October 1 until blooming, poinsettias should be placed in complete darkness for 14 continuous hours at night. Even the slightest amount of light from a garage light or door opening will keep the plant from flowering by Christmas. If it is necessary to grow the plant in a room where artificial light is common in the evening, make a cover for the plant by using a dark material or move it to a darkened room or closet each night.

During this 7- to 10-week period, the poinsettias also require 6 to 8 hours of bright sunlight.

Depending on the cultivar, the bracts should begin to color by late November. The poinsettia should be in

full flower by Christmas if it has received the required photoperiod after October 1.

Continue to water regularly and fertilize every 14 days. When colored bracts begin appearing, the poinsettia can be removed from continuous darkness and treated as you would a new poinsettia plant.

During the growth and photoperiodic treatment of your poinsettia, monitor it for insect and disease problems. Contact your local Extension office for control recommendations if you notice insects or suspect a disease problem.

### Poinsettia Trivia

- The plant we know as "poinsettia" is native to Mexico in the southern region known as Taxco del Alarcon.
- The poinsettia was introduced in 1828 by the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Joel Poinsett.
- The poinsettia has a milky, latex-like sap that may irritate the skin or eyes in some individuals.
- The poinsettia is NOT poisonous.
- Although research has shown it is not toxic, it is not recommended for human or animal consumption.
- National Poinsettia Day is December 12.
- Ancient Aztecs extracted a purplish dye from the bracts to be used in cosmetics and textiles.
- The sap was used by the Aztecs to treat fever.
- Other names for the poinsettia are lobster flower and flame leaf flower.



Poinsettia, variety unknown



Native poinsettias in Central America, late November



Winter Rose Early Red (upper right), Red Soul (center left), Princettia red (lower right)

## Legend of the Poinsettia

A charming story is told of Pepita, a poor Mexican girl who had no gift to present the Christ Child at Christmas Eve services. As Pepita walked slowly to the chapel with her cousin Pedro, her heart was filled with sadness rather than joy.

"I am sure, Pepita, that even the most humble gift, if given in love, will be acceptable in His eyes," said Pedro, consolingly.

Not knowing what else to do, Pepita knelt by the roadside and gathered a handful of common weeds, fashioning them into a small bouquet. Looking at the scraggly bunch of weeds, she felt more saddened and embarrassed than ever by the humbleness of her offering. She fought back a tear as she entered the small village chapel.

As she approached the altar, she remembered Pedro's kind words: "Even the most humble gift, if given in love,

will be acceptable in His eyes." She felt her spirit lift as she knelt to lay the bouquet at the foot of the nativity scene.

Suddenly, the bouquet of weeds burst into blooms of brilliant red, and all who saw them were certain that they had witnessed a Christmas miracle right before their eyes.

From that day on, the bright red flowers were known as the Flores de Noche Buena, or Flowers of the Holy Night, for they bloomed each year during the Christmas season.

Today, the common name for this plant is "poinsettia." (*Reprinted with permission from the Paul Ecke Ranch in Encinitas, California*)

## Resources

University of Illinois Extension. The Poinsettia Pages. <http://extension.illinois.edu/poinsettia/care.cfm>.

University of Minnesota Extension. Care of Poinsettias. <http://www.extension.umn.edu/garden/yard-garden/houseplants/care-of-poinsettias/>.

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