

Selection and Care of your Poinsettia

No other plant identifies with the holiday season than the poinsettia. This popular plant is a native of Mexico and was grown by the Aztecs for its brilliant red dye which was derived from its colorful bracts or 'flowers'. Joel Roberts Poinsett was the first United States Ambassador to Mexico. In 1828 he found a beautiful shrub with large red flowers growing next to a road. He took cuttings from the plant and brought them back to his



greenhouse in South Carolina. Even though Poinsett had an outstanding career as a United States Congressman and as an ambassador, he will always be remembered for introducing the poinsettia into the United States. In the early 1900's the Ecke family of southern California grew poinsettias outdoors for use as landscape plants and as a cut flower. Eventually the family grew poinsettias in greenhouses, and today are recognized as the leading developer and producer of poinsettias in the United States.

Until the 1960's poinsettias were very difficult to keep in the house for a long period of time because the leaves and the colorful bracts or 'flowers' dropped. Newer longer lasting varieties with better plant habits have been developed since that time. Also the palette of colors of poinsettias has been expanded from the traditional red to shades of pink, salmon, and rose. Some poinsettias bracts are completely a creamy white, while others are bi-color, with a blend of pink and white. Plant breeders have even developed a lemon yellow shade as well as a plum purple shade.

When buying, look at the lower leaves. If there are none, that means the plant's been packed away or stacked too closely on a bench somewhere. Look for small yellow flowers in the center of the large colorful bracts. Make sure they haven't fallen off. Preferably buy the plants when the flowers are a tight ball of buds. The tighter the buds, the longer the bracts will last

These plants do best with room temperatures between 65 - 75 degrees. Be sure to keep them away from drafts. Poinsettias require bright natural indirect light when kept indoors. They will develop yellow leaves and drop flowers if placed in direct sunlight. Keep the soil in the pot moist, do not let it dry out or get soggy. With proper watering and temperatures, poinsettia will continue to thrive. Let the plant go dry between watering. If it stays wet for too long, it'll wilt from loss of roots. Don't water on rainy days and don't mist.

After the holidays gradually reduce the watering of the plant until the soil feels dry between watering. The bracts may hold on until early spring, when new growth will appear on the plant. Poinsettias can be saved for a second season. Start by cutting plants back in early May to 3 - 4 inches and replot them. When frost danger is past,

place the pots outside in full sun. Water to keep the soil moist. Fertilize monthly when new growth begins using 20-20-20 water soluble fertilizer. Pinch plants back to control height when they reach 4 - 5 inches of new growth, and continue with each additional 2 - 3 inches of growth. Stop pinching back plants by early September. Bring them inside when outdoor temperatures go below 60 degrees and place them in a location that provides good indirect natural light.

Poinsettias not poisonous. The latex or white milky fluid from the plant may cause skin irritation or rashes. It is best keep these plants away from pets and small children

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**Al Krismer Plant Farm
3556 Poole Rd.
Cincinnati Ohio 45251
www.krismers.com**