

# Poinsettias



Poinsettias are tropical plants from Central America. The original plants grew into straight and tall trees, reaching up to 10 feet high. Ancient Aztecs made a purplish dye from the colorful bracts of the plant for use in textiles and cosmetics. The milky white sap was used to treat fevers. A group of Franciscan priests, settled in Mexico in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, began using the brilliant flowers in a yearly nativity procession. In the early 1800s, the first United States Ambassador to Mexico (1825 – 1829), Joel Roberts Poinsett, “discovered” the brilliantly red blooming plants and sent some samples back to his plantations in South Carolina. There he began propagating the lovely plants and sending them to his friends and botanical gardens. As the plant was gifted through this network of plant people, eventually a Pennsylvania nurseryman, Robert Buist, sold the plants under their botanical name, *Euphorbia pulcherrima* (which literally means “the most beautiful Euphorbia”), and is thought to be the first to do so. Around 1836, the most beautiful Euphorbia became known by the popular name, poinsettia.

In 1920, the Ecke family in California began production of field grown poinsettias which by that time grew wild in the area. The tall, leggy plants bloomed every winter, near the holiday season, leading Paul Ecke to the idea of making them an official holiday flower. The blooms they grew at the Ecke Ranch were sold, fresh cut, at roadside stands in the surrounding areas of Hollywood and Beverly Hills. For the next 40 years, the Ecke family grew, sold, and promoted the poinsettia as a holiday flower. By the 1960s, cultivars that grew as short, self-branching, potted plants, rather than the tall

field-grown varieties, became popular. Now the plants could be grown in the greenhouse, widening the availability of the poinsetta.

Although the original plants had only red bracts (the modified leaves which surrounded the tiny flowers), today there are many more colors to choose from: pinks, whites, marbles (pink and white variegated), red and white variegated, red and pink variegated, burgundy, even varieties that are nearly purple or plum colored. The shapes of the leaves and bracts vary also. There are heart shapes, jagged edged types, and even curved and ruffled bracts. Occasionally the leaves are variegated as well, green-gold or green-white.



Poinsettias have become so popular a holiday plant in the US – and so important to our floriculture industry – that National Poinsettia Day, December 12<sup>th</sup> (the date on which Joel Roberts Poinsett died), was set aside by an Act of Congress in honor of the man who brought poinsettias to the US.

Despite the popular misconception, poinsettias are not poisonous. The milky sap they secrete when damaged, called latex, is not toxic. There may be people and animals allergic to the sap and poinsettias are not intended to be ingested, but they have been demonstrated to be safe plants. They are even helpful in removing pollutants from the air inside your home.

To help your poinsettias do their best throughout the holidays in your home, follow these basic guidelines:

- Place the plant where it will receive at least six hours of indirect sunlight.
- Keep room temperatures between 68 – 70 degrees Fahrenheit.
- Keep your plant away from drafts! Cold drafts from doors or windows and warm drafts from heating or appliances are equally bad for poinsettias.
- Water the plant when the soil feels dry to the touch and do not let the plant sit in water for too long. After the soil is saturated, drain away excess water from any decorative container the

plant may be displayed in.

- Do not fertilize your plant while it's still blooming. Wait to fertilize after the blooms have finished.

Poinsettias can be very fragile and need to be handled with care. If any branches do fall from your plant, remember they were used as fresh cut flowers for many years and make your own holiday vase!

Sources for this article include: [www.plantmanagementnetwork.org/pub/php/review/xmasflower/](http://www.plantmanagementnetwork.org/pub/php/review/xmasflower/), [www.oglevee.com/Articles/Product/PoinsettiaInfo/history.html](http://www.oglevee.com/Articles/Product/PoinsettiaInfo/history.html), [www.ecke.com/new1/poin\\_consumer.asp](http://www.ecke.com/new1/poin_consumer.asp), [www.ecke.com/html/h\\_corp/corp\\_pntcare.html](http://www.ecke.com/html/h_corp/corp_pntcare.html)