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Extension Solutions for Homes and Gardens

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“The History of Holiday Poinsettias”

Poinsettias are part of the *Euphorbiaceae* or spurge family. Many plants in this family contain a milky sap, composed primarily of latex. Some people are mildly allergic to the sap of all poinsettia relatives, just as many people are to other forms of latex. In its native range of tropical Mexico, poinsettias are a perennial flowering shrub that can grow to ten feet tall! The showy colored parts of poinsettias that most people think are the flowers are actually colored bracts (modified leaves). The flowers or cyathia of the poinsettia are in the center of the colorful bracts. Contrary to popular belief, Poinsettias are not poisonous. Numerous studies have been conducted on poinsettia toxicity and according to the *American Medical Association's Handbook of Poisonous and Injurious Plants*, other than occasional cases of vomiting, ingestion of the poinsettia plant has been found to produce no effect.

The Aztecs called poinsettias "Cuetlaxochitl," which supposedly means "mortal flower that perishes like all that is pure." During the 14th-16th centuries the Aztecs used the sap to control fevers and the bracts were used to make a reddish dye in fabrics and cosmetics. In the Aztec culture, red had a symbolic meaning for purity. Montezuma, the last of the Aztec kings, would have poinsettias brought into what is now Mexico City by caravans because poinsettias could not be grown in the higher altitude of the city.

Joel Roberts Poinsett was the first United States Ambassador to Mexico being appointed by President Andrew Jackson in the 1820's. At the time of his appointment, Mexico was involved in a civil war. During his stay in Mexico he wandered the countryside looking for new plant species because of his interest in botany. In 1825 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 Joel 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.

A nurseryman from Pennsylvania, John Bartram is credited as being the first person to sell poinsettias under its botanical name, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*. The genus name, *Euphorbia*, comes from the Greek physician Euphorbus and includes many herbs and shrubs having acrid, milky sap. The species name, *pulcherrima*, is from the Latin adjective *pulcher*, meaning beautiful or handsome. William Prescott, a historian and horticulturist, was later asked to give *Euphorbia pulcherrima* a new name as it became more popular. At that time Mr. Prescott had just published a book called the *Conquest of Mexico* in which he detailed Joel Poinsett's discovery of the plant. So, Prescott named the plant poinsettia in honor of Joel Poinsett's discovery. 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 Ecke family grew poinsettias in greenhouses and today is recognized as the leading producer of poinsettias in the United States. The Paul Ecke Ranch in California grows over 80 percent of poinsettias in the United States for the wholesale market.

Poinsettias represent over 85 percent of the potted plant sales during the holiday season. Ninety percent of all poinsettias are exported from the United States to other countries. Poinsettias are commercially grown in all 50 states and California is the top poinsettia producing state. Today, there are over 100 varieties of poinsettias available. Over the years, breeders of the poinsettia have given us red, pink, white, orange, purple, and multi-colored forms of this durable plant. Approximately \$325 million worth of poinsettias are sold during the holiday season. Seventy-four percent of Americans still prefer traditional

red poinsettias; 8 percent prefer white and 6 percent pink. Poinsettias are the most popular Christmas plant even though most are sold in a 6 week period.

Poinsettias are traditionally Christmas plants, though they can last through the holiday season and beyond. It is important to select the best plant for your home environment. A fresh poinsettia is one on which little or no yellow pollen is showing on the flower clusters in the center of the bracts. Choose a plant with dark green foliage down to the soil line. The poinsettia should look full, balanced and attractive from all sides. The plant should be 2 1/2 times taller than the diameter of the container. Choose plants that are not drooping or wilting. Check the plant's soil to see if it's wet and the plant is wilted; this could be an indication of a root rot problem. Do not leave poinsettias outside because cold temperatures will damage the plant. Remember, this is a tropical plant and cannot survive in cold extremes; low temperatures even for even a few minutes can damage the bracts and leaves.

Unwrap your poinsettia carefully and place in indirect light. Six hours of light daily is ideal. Keep the plant from touching cold windows. Keep poinsettias away from warm or cold drafts from radiators, air registers or open doors and windows. Ideally poinsettias require daytime temperatures of 60 to 70°F and night time temperatures around 55°F. High temperatures will shorten the plant's life. Move the plant to a cooler room at night, if possible. Check the soil daily and be sure to punch holes in foil wraps so water can drain into a saucer and discard excess water. You could also remove the wrapping when watering the plant and allow it to drain into a sink for several minutes before replacing the wrapping. Only water when soil becomes dry to the touch. It is not necessary to fertilize the plant while it is in bloom.

Information for this article was referenced from The University of Illinois Extension website <http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/poinsettia/>. Contact our office if you would like more information on poinsettias and other potted flowering plants.

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