

## Poinsettia, Christmas Eve Flower

By Susan Camp

When I told my friend Jane that this week's "Gardening Corner" column is about poinsettias, she said, "Please tell me how much to water them. I have one as big as my Christmas tree!" Jane's comment may sound like an exaggeration, but in their native tropical forests of western Mexico, poinsettias grows as scraggly deciduous shrubs, reaching heights of 3 to 10 feet with spreads of 3 to 7 feet. Most of us never see poinsettias that large.

Poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) is named for Joel R. Poinsett, the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico. Poinsett was a botanist and gardener and introduced the plant to his home state of South Carolina in 1824. Since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, poinsettia has become the most popular Christmas potted plant, with an estimated 60 million poinsettias grown in the United States every year. Grown almost exclusively as an indoor potted plant, poinsettia can survive outdoors in USDA Hardiness Zones 9 to 11.

The beauty of poinsettia lies in its traditional flaming scarlet, flower-like bracts, although some of the over 100 cultivars available today display white, pink, lavender, yellow, or marbled bracts. The actual poinsettia flower is composed of inconspicuous yellow petals in the center of the bracts. The deep green leaves provide an attractive contrast.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-101 "Care of Specialty Potted Plants" cautions that hot environments and improper light and watering are the leading causes of death for potted indoor plants. Poinsettia is a high maintenance plant, requiring bright light, protection from drafts, and temperatures between 65 and 70 °F. Too much water can promote the development of fungal root or stem rot. Allow the soil to dry out before watering.

Many plant owners try to coax their poinsettias to bloom for a second season, not always successfully. The procedure is complicated, similar to the regimen for Christmas cactus. If you like a challenge, coaxing a poinsettia to re-bloom will offer a great opportunity for you to test your perseverance. If not, there are plenty of beautiful poinsettias to purchase and enjoy for one holiday season.

If you decide to try for a second blooming season, wait until all the bracts have fallen, and set your poinsettia in an area with a temperature of 55 to 60 °F. Keep in indirect light and water only enough to prevent the stems from drying out. Cut the stems back to no more than 5 inches and repot in new medium. Place the poinsettia in direct light when new growth appears. Move outside into light shade once the danger of frost has passed. Pinch stems back to encourage new stems, stopping around Labor Day, when you will bring the poinsettia inside to a sunny spot with a temperature of 65 °F during the day. Like the Christmas cactus, Poinsettia requires "long nights" of at least 12 hours of complete darkness without artificial light each day from mid-

September to around December 1. If you follow the procedure faithfully, you may be rewarded with blooms by mid-December.

Aside from fungal rots, occasional bacterial or viral infections can occur. Insect pests include the usual suspects: scale insects, aphids, mealybugs, and red spider mites.

Poinsettia was long thought to be toxic to humans and animals. The plant is not poisonous, but the milky sap contains latex-like substances that can cause an allergic reaction in a sensitive individual. Chemicals in the leaves and stems can cause gastric upset, as the infamous Bilbo Baggins discovered after snacking on a leaf. Bilbo was fine after a steroid shot and some kitty antacid. The lovely poinsettia went to live with a neighbor.

Poinsettia, known as La Flor de la Noche Buena, or Christmas Eve Flower, in Mexico is one of the many beautiful plants blooming this time of year. Enjoy all of the glorious sight, sounds, and smells of the season. Happy Holidays!

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