

## The Gift That Gives Again and Again

Have you seen the latest and most exotic fashions in that perennial holiday plant, the poinsettia? Perhaps it is a prejudice of old age but I expect watermelons to be deep red inside a green skin and I expect poinsettias to be red as well. When grown in the tropics, this plant was not a houseplant but a towering 16 foot shrub. The story goes that Mr. Poinsett our ambassador to Mexico admired them and thought them so charming they should be enjoyed in colder climes. They have been scientifically shrunk to provide Yule color and given a genetic explosion of new looks.

They do look splendid in churches this season and they are a warm welcome in the foyers of restaurants as well. To blend with a greater variety of sites the poinsettia genes have been tumbled and stretched until the bracts are not only red, but even spattered and striped like an awning in weird and wonderful colors. The old and familiar red just became too old and too familiar.

If you have been given a poinsettia of any ilk and wish to keep it as an investment rather than add it to the compost pile, it can be done. Poinsettia, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, is a long-lived perennial and it will be happy to bloom again next holiday season. As for now, move them from under the Christmas tree to a place where they will receive six hours of light each day. Do not soak them but do keep the soil moist. Be sure if your plants have been swathed in celebratory foil that you either remove it or poke drainage holes in the bottom. If you are an avid houseplant person you will have a 'mister', excellent for refreshing the leaves. If you are not, just set a plant in the kitchen sink and sprinkle it with tepid water every day or so. In placing it, avoid heat sources and drafts.

With care, it will remain attractive for weeks. In late March or early April prune the plant back to about eight inches, leaving three or four green leaves on each shoot. If any colored 'petals' remain, cut these bracts off. The actual flowers were those small yellow berry-like clusters in the center of the red bracts. With attention to the need for sunlight and water and a twice a month feeding of diluted fish emulsion or kelp extract it should flourish. I've seen poinsettias set aside, ignored and still survive but good care is more likely to guarantee success.

In June you can transplant it to a pot a size or two larger or you can safely plant it outdoors for the summer. Poinsettias need rich organic soil with compost or leaf mold. Keep your plant from getting too large by pinching the shoots back to two or three fully grown leaves. Do this every third week or so until mid-August. The plant should be brought back inside before the night temperatures fall below 55 degrees. Once inside give it water and six hours of sunshine but no further fertilizer.

Because *Euphorbia pulcherrima* is one of those plants that are light sensitive, the bracts won't color if it does not have short days. Other plants that share this characteristic include kalanchoe, Christmas cactus, and chrysanthemum. Being a tropical plant, poinsettias must have very long nights, 14 dark hours for eight to ten weeks. Since you do not live in a tropical village but in a lighted house, your plant must be tucked into a dark place every single day from 5pm until 8 the next morning. This regime should begin October 1.

Don't trust to a closet: someone will come along looking for a missing glove and turn on the light and even that exposure will be enough to inhibit flowering. A sturdy carton tipped over it or a large black trash bag may work. In early December you should see the bracts flushed with color, ready to join the family again.

Environmental note: There is T.V., R.V, and now there is E.V. and that stands for electric vehicle and a surprise to me to learn that there are more than 100,000 electric cars on the road made by ten different automakers. Perhaps if you have a very long memory you can remember electric cars from the earlier days of the car generation. When I was a child there were three elderly sisters who drove their short, high, black electric car to church every Sunday morning. It rather resembled an Amish buggy, without the horse of course. It seemed no more peculiar than watching a man crank a car to start it and then hop into the car before that 'start' petered out. A lot of things about the good old days are just as well forgotten.

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