



Poinsettias – A Perfect Holiday Plant

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Few plants shout out ‘Merry Christmas’ like bright red festive poinsettias, for sale now from venues ranging from big box stores and groceries to our local garden centers. Over 80 million poinsettias are sold each year according to the USDA, with red being the most popular color, making up about 80 percent of purchases. White and pink poinsettias are also in demand and for quite a while, these three colors were all that was available.

Over the last couple of decades, the range of colors in poinsettias just exploded. Starting with creamy yellows and some bicolors; now one can find salmon, burgundy, gold, hot pink, and variegated poinsettias. Some have spots and blotches; others appear striped or even frosted. Plants are bred or treated to be multi-branching as well as more compact. Tiny poinsettia plants are springing up in dish gardens while gorgeous standards, resembling small trees can create quite an impact when company joins you for the holidays or just for your own admiration. Short on floor or counterspace? Don’t overlook poinsettia hanging baskets that are available at some markets.

The Winter Rose™ series, introduced a few years back by the Paul Ecke Plant Company, brandishes absolutely stunning, double ‘blossoms’ composed of numerous bracts that tend to curl under giving the appearance of a fully opened rose. At first, the multi-layered blooms were only available in a dark red, but now plants can be found in light and dark pinks, whites, and a lovely pink and cream variegated cultivar, aptly named Winter Rose™ Marble. This series of poinsettias tends to be taller and stiffer than other types, but this also makes them marvelous holiday cut flowers. Try arranging cut stems with holiday greenery, berries and other natural décor for a lovely, seasonal bouquet or centerpiece. With a little care, they should last 2 to 3 weeks.

Either you love or hate those painted poinsettias for sale in an array of colors like sky blue, turquoise, fuchsia, lavender or even tangerine. These Fantasy™ poinsettias, as they are called, became popular in Europe a few years ago and now are making their way across U.S. markets. You might think they are dyed, like green carnations for St. Patrick’s Day, but they are actually white poinsettias that are painted. Keep in mind that the paint may be water soluble so when

watering, just moisten the potting mix. And no, if you do manage to get your plant to rebloom next year, the bracts will not be colored; they will just be white.



Painted poinsettias. Photo by dmp2020.

I'd be lying if I didn't say that I think Princettia™ poinsettias are not just beautiful, but very spunky and cute. Plants are more petite, compact, and heavily branched. They are covered with many clusters of smaller, colored bracts. It is these colored bracts that draw us to poinsettias. The bracts are not petals but modified leaves. The flowering part of a poinsettia is the yellow cluster in the center of a whorl of bracts. Try to select plants where the yellow flowers are unopened, still in the bud stage for longer lasting displays.

It's amazing to discover that all of these gorgeous poinsettias arose from a ten-foot high or so perennial shrub native to Mexico. First brought to the U.S. by Joel Poinsett, a botanist as well as the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico, poinsettias have been occupying enthusiasts', growers' and hybridizers' time since the 1830s and presently over 100 varieties are available. Regardless of which poinsettia you fall for, care for all of them is similar.

Place plants in bright, indirect light. Keep them away from drafty doors or windows as the cold temperatures can damage the plants. Also, don't place poinsettias near heat sources like wood burning stoves, space heaters or fireplaces. Like most people, poinsettias are happiest at temperatures between 60 and 70 degrees F.

Plants should be allowed to dry out slightly between waterings. Stick your finger about a half inch down into the potting mix. If dry, give plants a good watering. Always remove the decorative foil sleeve from the pot before watering. I usually bring mine over to the sink and water until it runs out the drainage holes. Then let it sit for a bit to thoroughly drain before putting it back in its spot with or without its foil sleeve.

Despite age old rumors to the contrary, poinsettias are not poisonous. According to the National Clearinghouse for Poison Control Centers, there are no records of fatalities due to poinsettias.

Being members of the euphorbia family, they do exude a milky sap when cut or crushed and sensitive individuals may develop a contact dermatitis from the sap.

Pick up one or more poinsettias from a local greenhouse to brighten up your holiday home. With a little care they will stay bright and beautiful through the New Year. For information on caring for poinsettias or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.