



Poinsettias: The Story of a Holiday Treasure

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Photo by dmp2024

It just isn't the holiday season without a poinsettia. We adorn homes, churches, and other public spaces with them at this time of year. Their bold color and striking presence are hard to miss. With a story as spectacular as their seasonal color, the poinsettia is a plant to be treasured.

Poinsettias have a rich history and culture. While we associate them with the coldest time of year here in the Northeast, they actually come from a much warmer climate! Known as Cuetlaxochitl in their native region of Mexico, they were cultivated and used by indigenous peoples for medicines, dyes, and decorations. In Aztec culture, the Cuetlaxochitl held cultural significance as a symbol of purity and were also used to symbolize a new life earned by warriors who had died in battle. The Mayans called this plant k'alul wits. Many traditional uses for k'alul wits are still practiced by the Tének people in southeastern Mexico, today.

Their association with the Christmas holiday started when Franciscan monks in Mexico began to use their bright red and green foliage to decorate nativity scenes. It became known as la flor de Nochebuena, translating to "the Christmas Eve flower." It was brought to the United States by Joel Roberts Poinsett, the first U.S. minister to Mexico, in 1825. Poinsett was a man of many talents, having a career in politics, a passion for science, and an enthusiasm for agriculture. Through continuous plant breeding and developments, there are now hundreds of varieties of poinsettia.

Contrary to popular belief, poinsettia flowers are small and barely noticeable. The insignificant yellow flowers are surrounded by stunning, colorful bracts. Bracts are not flower petals, but rather, specialized leaves. The bracts of a poinsettia change color when daylight hours begin to shorten. Breeders have developed poinsettias that have bracts of various shapes, textures, and colors. Some are variegated or have speckles of color on them. These cultivated varieties (cultivars) are quite different from the straight species, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, in its native environment, where it can grow over 10 feet tall, is semi-evergreen, and can sometimes grow a bit scraggly.

Greenhouses start poinsettia production as early as July. Tiny plugs get put into their pots while we're all still soaking up the summer sun. (It makes sense when you remember that they're originally from Mexico!) They grow as little green plants through the rest of summer and autumn. The fall equinox will naturally trigger these plants to change color, however, growers can manipulate their greenhouses to create ideal darkness/brightness to help time the coloring of their plants for holiday sales.

If you've got a green thumb and are trying to get a previous year's poinsettia to "reflower," simulating this dark period with an opaque container, paper bag, or moving the plant into a closet or dark location for 14-16 hours a day can do the trick! Make sure they're receiving 8 hours of bright, direct light, and not a ray more! After about 4 weeks of these conditions, most poinsettias can go back to their life with your other houseplants, as normal, and you should see a change in color.



Photo by H. Zidack

Shopping for a new poinsettia as a gift or decoration this year? Always shop for a plant that is brightly colored and has tight (tiny yellow) flowers that aren't already going by. Select a plant that has evenly moist soil, and a nice shape that doesn't appear to have been crowded for too long. Here in Connecticut, make sure that your florist, grocer, or grower packages the poinsettia for you to help protect it from cold winds while transporting it to and from your car. When you get it home keep it away from entryways, drafts, fireplaces, or heating vents, and keep it in a room that is between 60° and 70°F. Water your poinsettia when the soil begins to dry out in the pot and enjoy the holiday season.

Whether you're reviving an old poinsettia, shopping for a new one, or deciding that artificial is the best choice for your home this year, take the time to recognize the special journey these plants have taken to become such a treasure and staple in our holiday celebrations. There truly isn't anything quite like it!

For questions about caring for your poinsettias or for other gardening queries, contact the UCONN Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at (877) 486-6271, visit their web site at www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu, or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.