



Here is information on caring & selecting poinsettias—

Just in time for holiday publications!

Selecting & Caring for Poinsettias

The use of poinsettias as decorative plants is said to have originated in Mexico when (according to folklore) weeds placed by a poor child on a church altar on Christmas Eve miraculously burst into a beautiful red flower. Although its origin is Mexican, the plant is named after an American, Joel Poinsett, who brought it to the United States to grow in his own greenhouse.

Poinsettias are this nation's number one selling potted plant and they come in dozens of varieties and colors of poinsettias. A local greenhouse, nursery, farm stand or florist is the best place to go to explore a wider range of poinsettias than available at most supermarkets. These outlets also usually do a better job of caring for the plants. Some varieties to look for include: Monet which has large, cream colored bracts that are speckled in a deep pink; the Midnight Monet with a darker tone of speckling on the bract; and for those preferring reds look for Winter Rose Red. This variety has only been around for a few years, but is gaining popularity every year. As the name implies, the bracts have a rose-like growth habit that is most unusual for poinsettias. The leaves are also different than most poinsettias as they are crinkled. The Winter Rose varieties are also available in deep pink and coral.

When purchasing a poinsettia look for the following qualities:

Watch out for yellowing leaves, this can be a sign of root rot.

Check for pests such as whiteflies that rest on the undersides of leaves, and Powdery Mildew (white fuzzy colonies that grow on leaves and bracts). Leaves and bracts should generally be free of any spotting.

Select plants with tight button-like cyathias (*cyathias are the yellow flower part in the center of the bract*)

Old plants usually drop leaves, be sure there are leaves close to the soil line as well as other parts of the plant.

Do not purchase plants that are in cold, drafty places and be sure to transport it with a protective sleeve.

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Do not leave poinsettias in a cold car.

If properly cared for, poinsettias can last well beyond the holiday season. In fact, by following these tips it can even re-bloom the next holiday season!

- Keep poinsettias away from drafts and heat sources. Do not place on top of televisions, near fireplaces or doors.
- Optimal temperatures are between 68 F and 70 F. (Bracts will retain color better if temps do not go above 70F)
- Provide at least 6 hours of indirect sunlight each day.
- Allow soil to dry out between waterings but not so that the plant wilts. Allowing the soil to dry out helps prevent root rot. Do not leave standing water under the pot.
- Mist poinsettias frequently during bloom. Humidity levels over 30% are adequate.
- Leaves will usually fall by late March/early June at this point you should cut the poinsettia back to 8.
- No need for fertilizer during bloom. Begin to fertilize regularly (every 2 weeks) with an all-purpose fertilizer to promote new growth.
- The poinsettia can be placed outside as long as there is no danger of frost and average daily temps are above 55F. (keep an eye out for pest infestation if kept outside)
- Do not prune the plant after September 1. Pruning during the summer will help keep the plant busy.
- From October 1 until you have good size bracts, the plant will need to be kept in complete darkness for 14 hours each night (temps between 60-70 F). Keep the plant in bright sunlight for 6-8 hours during the day.
- Color in the bracts should begin to show in mid-November.
- Back off on fertilizer once poinsettias are in full bloom.

If you're worried about poinsettias being poisonous (as many people are), rest assured that they are relatively harmless. Ohio State University and the Society of American Florists conducted studies that showed no toxicity at ingestion levels far exceeding those likely to occur in a household. A 50-pound child would have to eat over 500 poinsettia bracts to surpass experimental doses! This certainly doesn't mean that poinsettias can be eaten, but that relative to other plants, they are safe. Be adventurous this holiday season! Don't pick out the same old poinsettia and challenge yourself to bringing it back to bloom next season. If you are planning on giving poinsettias as gifts, attach a copy of this article. Good Luck and Happy Holidays!