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Poinsettias— home care and culture

Kenneth L. Goldsberry¹

Quick Facts

Poinsettias traditionally are Christmas flowering plants but can produce flowers throughout the year.

Select poinsettia plants with dark green foliage and no lower leaves missing.

Place poinsettias near a sunny window and water thoroughly whenever the soil feels dry to the touch.

Ideal temperatures for poinsettias are 60° to 70° F.

In order for a poinsettia to flower and undergo bract coloration, it must receive as much sunshine as possible but have at least 12 out of 24 hours of uninterrupted darkness.

Poinsettia plant parts are not poisonous when ingested.

The poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) was cultivated by the Aztecs in Mexico before Christianity was known in the Western Hemisphere. Practical uses by the Indians included a source of reddish-purple dye from the bracts and a medicinal preparation made from the latex to counteract fever. The plant also played a part in fiestas and was found in botanical gardens. In 1925, Joel R. Poinsett, a botanist and the first U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, sent some plants to his home in South Carolina. This was the first introduction of the poinsettia into the United States.

Many people have been instrumental in the development of the poinsettia as a house plant—the Ecke family of California (Eckespoint series), the Heggs of Norway (Hegg varieties) and Jim Mikkelsen of Ohio (Mikkelsen varieties). All poinsettia varieties are maintained easily in the home and have color until mid March.

The showy red, pink, white or mottled terminal portions of the plant are called bracts. They are modified leaves that accumulate anthocyanin pigments during proper light and temperature conditions. The flowers (cyathia) of the poinsettia are located in the center of the bracts. The male and female parts are present plus a familiar yellow-edged nectary with sweet and fragrant nectar.

Selection

Choose a plant with dark green foliage. Plants with light green, yellow or fallen leaves generally have a root disease problem, have been over watered, had an excessive dry period or received limited fertilization. The bracts should be well developed with little pollen showing on the flowers. When outside temperatures approach 35° F, be sure the plant is wrapped well before transporting. Low temperatures, for short periods of time, can damage leaves and bracts.

Cultural requirements. Keep poinsettias in a bright area, out of cold drafts and away from excessive heat. Ideal temperatures are 67° to 70° F during the day and 60° to 62° F at night. The poinsettia plant will last longer if placed in a cooler room where direct sun is available during a portion of the day.

Watering. Check plants daily and water thoroughly whenever the soil feels dry to the touch. Plants in clay pots require more attention, while those in plastic pots often are overwatered. Apply water until it runs out the drainage hole. If the container is wrapped with foil, make a hole for continued drainage. Discard any collected water present in the drainage receptacle.

Reflowering

Poinsettias can be "reflowered" for any future Christmas providing some simple cultural requirements are observed. After a plant has passed its stage of usefulness, remove the bracts and a portion of the stem.

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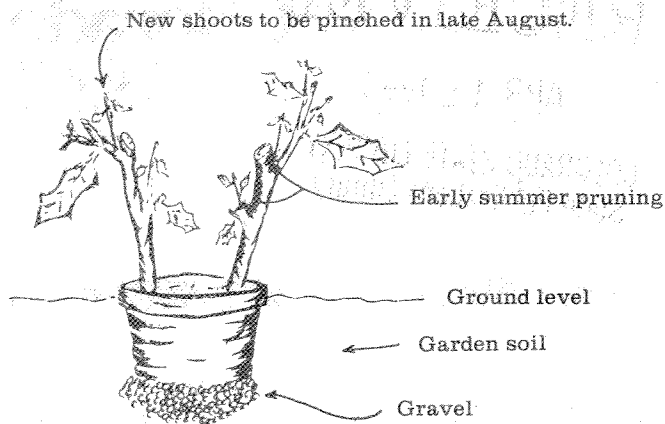


Figure 1: A poinsettia plant pruned and pinched for succeeding years' use. It can be placed outdoors after danger of spring frosts have passed.

"Cutting back" can be done any time until mid-July, but is determined by the final shape of the plant desired. Three or four leaves should be left on the remaining stems (Figure 1).

Late spring and summer care. Shift the plant to the next size larger pot using a well-drained, preferably heat-treated soil. A soil mix of equal parts garden soil, sphagnum peat moss and perlite or coarse sand, by volume, is desirable. Thoroughly mix one tablespoon of superphosphate fertilizer in each gallon of soil mix.

Prune tall growth at approximately six-week intervals to keep the plant formed. The last pruning and/or pinch should occur in late August or early September.

Indoor culture. If the plant is kept indoors, place it in a bright area where the temperature will remain fairly constant, water as needed and fertilize with a complete fertilizer approximately every two to three weeks.

Outside culture. In some instances it may be desirable to place the plant outdoors during the summer. After the danger of frost is past, and minimum temperatures reach 55° F, the plant can be placed on the patio, or sunk into the ground in a well-drained, slightly shaded location in the garden (see Figure 1). Turn the pot once a week to prevent root development through the drainage hole. Plants should be brought into the house when night temperatures are colder than 55° F (approximately Sept. 1 in Colorado).

Fall care. In order for the poinsettia to flower and undergo bract coloration, it must receive as much sunshine as possible but have at least 12 out of 24 hours of uninterrupted darkness (see Figure 2) during which time the temperature should be maintained between 60° and 70° F.

The dark treatment (short days) should start about Oct. 1 and extend until color can be seen in the bracts (approximately Thanksgiving). Fertilization and watering should be continued to encourage good growth.

The poinsettia is a woody plant that can be trained easily into numerous shapes during the

summer pruning periods. Consider a poinsettia tree, hanging basket or some other artistic creation. Just remember the last pinching date and the darkness requirement if a masterpiece is desired for Christmas.

Disease and Pest Control

Poinsettias often attract pests. Root diseases are enhanced by cold, moist soil temperatures. Fungicides (usually available at garden centers) should be applied as a soil drench if lower leaves start turning yellow and fall off, as a root rot condition may exist.

Insects usually can be washed off with a mild soap and water using a sponge or gentle spray. Mealy bugs and white flies may infest poinsettia plants and will require special attention.

Poinsettia Not Poisonous

Research in 1971 at Ohio State University showed that rats given unusually high doses of portions of poinsettia plants in their diet were not adversely affected. Based on the rodent tests, which are accepted by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, the commission denied a 1975 petition filed by a New York citizen demanding that poinsettia plants carry caution labels that indicate they are poisonous.

Parents should be aware that parts of all plant materials may cause varying degrees of discomfort if eaten and should be kept out of reach of small children.

References

Ball Red Book, 14th edition. 1985. Vic Ball editor, Reston Publishing Co., Reston, VA.

Lieberth, J.A., 1987. New Horizons for Poinsettia's. Greenhouse Grower, (Feb.), pp. 10-13.

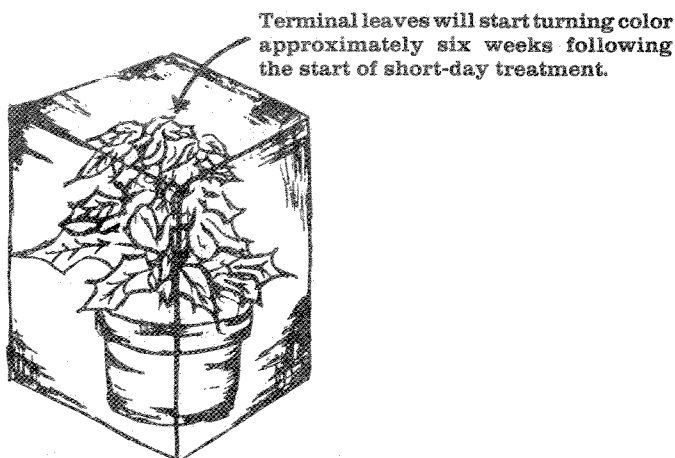


Figure 2: A wastebasket or opaque box can be used to keep the plant in darkness for a period of 12 hours out of 24. Start Oct. 1 and continue until color is showing in top bracts.