

## **Poinsettia Selection and Care**

Probably the most familiar of all Christmas potted plants to those of us in the Rio Grande Valley, due to our close proximity to Mexico, is the Poinsettia. The Poinsettia originates from Mexico, near the city of Taxco about 70-miles southeast of Mexico City. The Aztecs were the first to use this plant called 'Cuectlaxochitl', for dyes, medication and in festivals. In the seventeenth century, a group of Franciscan priests utilized this plant during Christmas festivals due to its bright colors and Christmas time blooming. The Poinsettia in Mexico is called "Noche Buena". However, it was not until 1825, when Dr. Joel Poinsett, the first American Ambassador to Mexico, found the Poinsettia, during a Christmas time visit to Taxco. The Poinsettia was growing and blooming on the hillsides surrounding the city. Poinsett, who was a botanist of great ability, had a few plants shipped to his home in South Carolina. Following the introduction of this Christmas time blooming plant to the U.S. it has spread throughout the world and carries the name of Poinsettia in honor of Dr. Poinsett.

Red is the predominant color of the present-day Poinsettia, just as it was when it was first discovered in Mexico. Yet, cultivars may be found in many colors that include white, pink, and several combinations of these. The striking colors and the ease with which the Poinsettia can be grown, and the long lasting color display make these plants very popular during the holiday season. To keep your potted Poinsettia looking its best, there are a few things you should do.

**Damage protection.** Keep your plant away from animals, small children, or heavily used traffic areas as they are easily damaged.

**Light.** Give your plants some natural light, the more the better. Direct sunlight is not necessary, too much direct sunlight through a window can burn the leaves, and so just a bright sunny room is best.

**Temperature.** Keep your plant away from hot or drying things like televisions, heaters, stoves, fireplaces and air conditioning vents. Poinsettias keep their bright colors longer if they are kept at 60 to 72 degrees F. Putting your plant outside at night, protected from breezes, frost and wind, is an excellent practice.

**Water.** Water your plants only when the soil is dry to the touch. Be careful not to let your plant stand in water after watering, even for as little as one hour, as this will cause the leaves to turn yellow and drop off.

Once the holiday season has ended, and you wish to keep your Poinsettia, there are a few things to do. First, decide if you want to keep it in its pot or plant it in your yard.

**Keeping in Pots.** Water the plant as mentioned. Eventually the leaves will start to fall off. Then, until next spring, reduce watering keeping the soil almost dry.

Put the pot in a shady, protected area, cut the plant back to about one-half its height. When new growth is four to six inches long, pinch out the growing tip down to a fully developed leaf. In late August, pinch the tips off again just above a fully developed leaf. In October, bring the plant inside to a warm location and increase watering. In November decrease watering again, keeping the plant on the dry side. During this period place, your Poinsettia in an area (for 5-weeks) that gets 12-hours of total darkness at night, such as a closet. Remember Poinsettia blooms are triggered by long hours of darkness, any interruption in the dark will keep the plant from blooming. So, 5-weeks of 12-hours of total darkness at night is very critical.

**Planting outside.** Planting your Poinsettia in the ground is a lot simpler. Choose a spot in the yard where drainage is good and there is some protection from cold. It is good if you pick an area where there are no nighttime lights, such as streetlights, porch lights or lights through a window. Plant the Poinsettia as you would any shrub, and then cut the plant back to one-half its height in the spring and again in August. Remember do not prune after August, as Poinsettias will not flower in time for Christmas. Fertilize your Poinsettia with a balanced fertilizer like rose food with a systemic insecticide to fight against aphids and whitefly. In the fall add some superphosphate to stimulate flowering.

**Cutting Poinsettia blossoms.** To have cut Poinsettia flowers in your house from plants in your yard, you should, a day or two prior to actually cutting the blossom, strip off all the foliage from the stems you want to cut. When you are ready to cut your blossom, take a bucket containing an inch or two of rubbing alcohol or boiling water. Immediately after cutting, place the cut side of the stem in the liquid for several minutes to seal the stem. This keeps the milky sap in the plant. Doing this, keeps the flower looking fresh and bright for several days. If your flowers start to wilt, submerge the stem and flower in lukewarm water overnight. A bathtub works best for this. If you should happen to break off a flower-leaf, seal the area with a flame, using a candle or a match.

(Information source: Cecile Waugh of Waugh's Nursery, McAllen, TX.)  
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