

THE CHRISTMAS POINSETTIA

By Sue Haffner



Photograph from Preturf.com

The poinsettia that we are already seeing featured in nurseries and garden shops has become one of the symbols of Christmas in many parts of the world. As you may know, it's a member of the Euphorbia family, published in 1833 as *Euphorbia pulcherrima*. It is characterized by a single female flower surrounded by individual male flowers all enclosed in a cup---shaped structure called a cyathium. The showy red portion of the plant, popularly referred to as the flower, consists of modified leaves or bracts. While each individual leaf is correctly a bract, common usage has designated the entire showy portion as the bract or bracts.

Native to the Taxco area of Mexico, the poinsettia was prized and cultivated by the Aztecs in Pre-Columbian times. Their name for it was Cuetlaxochitl. Franciscan monks living near Taxco in the seventeenth century began to use the flower in the Fiesta of Santa Presbre, a nativity processing, because of its color and its holiday blooming time.

The plant was first introduced into the United States in 1825 by Joel Roberts Poinsett (1779--1851), who was the first American ambassador to Mexico and also a trained botanist. He first saw the plants on a visit to Taxco. He collected specimens

and sent them to his home in Greenville, South Carolina. From there, he distributed plants to some botanical gardens and to some horticultural friends, including John Bartram of Philadelphia. Bartram, in turn, supplied the plant to Robert Buist, a nurseryman, who first sold the plant as *Euphorbia poinsettia*. Even though the plant was by then already established by its botanical name, it has continued to be popularly known as poinsettia.

The commercial production of poinsettias began around 1909 by Albert Ecke, a Swiss immigrant who farmed in the Los Angeles area. His descendants are still prominent in distributing these plants. Their website is: <http://www.pauleckepoinsettias.com/>

POINSETTIA CULTURE

Light: Poinsettias prefer bright, indirect light to full sun. If placed in low light areas, such as the interior of a room, the bract color will last up to 4 to 6 weeks, yet the overall health of the plant will decline.

Moisture: Poinsettias should be watered thoroughly until water runs out through the drainage holes. Remove all water from the saucer so it will not be absorbed back into the soil. This practice keeps the plant from becoming wet and a prime candidate for root rot. In order to tell if your plant is dry enough to be watered, it is best to pinch some soil (from as deep in the pot as you can get) between your forefinger and thumb, squeeze, then let go. If soil clings to your finger, it is moist enough to leave awhile longer. If not, water again. If your poinsettia is allowed to wilt, its lower leaves may turn yellow and drop off.

Fertilizer: While in bloom, poinsettias do not require fertilizer. After flowers fade, fertilize with a balanced houseplant fertilizer.

Temperature: Temperatures found in most homes are acceptable, but a warm location will greatly improve the lasting quality. Ideally, 68 to 75 degrees at night are best.

Special notes: In response to the allegation that the poinsettia is a poisonous plant, the Society of American Florists in conjunction with Ohio State University conducted a research project in 1971: the results gave the poinsettia a clean bill of health. There was no evidence that it is poisonous.

To induce flowering: Poinsettias require an eight--week period of 14 hours of darkness per day. They need high light the remaining 10 hours per day. The "shading" and bright periods induce flower buds to form. This may be accomplished in the home by placing the plant in a dark closet at a specific time at night and removing it 14 hours later. This schedule should be started the first few weeks in September for color by Christmas.

With proper care, poinsettias will remain in color long after Christmas. Once the bracts begin to fade, usually in March or April, cut the plants back to 4 or 6 inches above the soil level. Continue to keep them in bright light, then place them outdoors after all danger of frost has passed and night temperatures are above 50 degrees. In mid-July cut off the top 3-4 inches which should produce a shorter, bushier plant. Bring the poinsettia indoors when it's time to put it on its blooming schedule.