

Poinsettia: The Winter Holiday Plant!

By David Mow and Lisa MacPhee Morgan County SWCD

Poinsettia, *Euphorbia pulcherrima* is native to Mexico and Central America. In the wild this plant can grow up to 12 feet tall! In the United States, it is used mainly as an annual, displayed as decoration during the Christmas season, due to its beautiful red coloration. Did you know that what many people think are blooms are the plants "bracts". Bracts are small, leaflike structures often positioned beneath a flower on some plants. The blooms of a poinsettia are actually small, yellow-colored beads above the red bracts.

Being a tropical plant, it requires temperatures between 50 and 75 degrees. So, keep it warm on the trip home from the store! You can grow it year-round if you want to try! This plant likes to be kept moist but needs to be potted in well-draining soil. It is best to remove the foil wrapper that is usually found around the base of their pots because it will hold too much water. Using a pan or saucer under it is much better. Keeping a humidifier near the plant can also be beneficial.

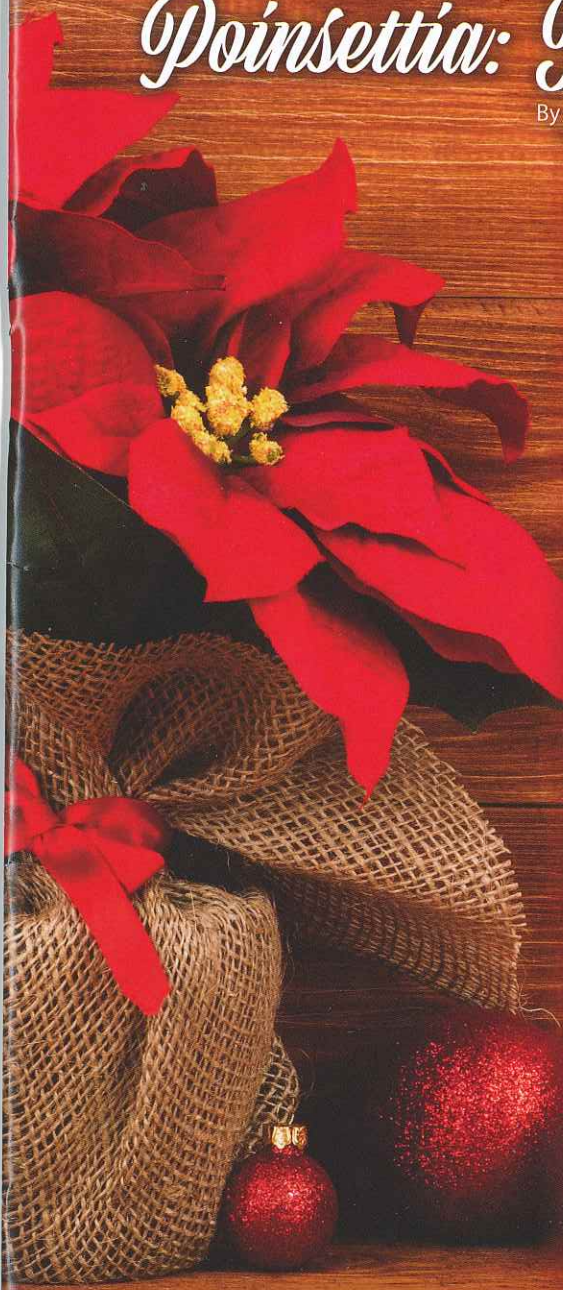
You will need to take some special steps for them to regain their color in time for the next holiday season. After the flowers, bracts, and many of the leaves drop off, let the soil in the pot dry completely. At this point, the plant is going dormant and needs to be kept in a cool dark area, about 50°. Water the pot just enough to keep the woody stem from shriveling. In mid-spring re-pot the plant and cut the stems back to around six inches. At this point, water the plant well and place it in a sunny and warm window. When new growth appears, you will want to fertilize the plant. If you desire, you can place it outside if the temperature is over 50°, even at night. As temperatures begin to drop in the fall, bring it back inside. Around the first of October, you need to reduce the amount



INDIANA'S NATIVE
POINSETTIA; BY DAVID MOW

of light that it receives. This will prepare it to "bloom" again. It requires thirteen hours of total darkness every day. You can provide this darkness by putting a box over it at night and removing it during the day or putting it in a closet or room with no light for 13 hours at a time. If you do not take this step, the plant will not develop color in the bracts or bloom again. Because of this extra effort to get that beautiful red color to come back, most people just buy a new one every year.

Most people don't know that we have *Euphorbia* that grows wild in Indiana. They are called Spurge, and one species of Spurge will change color naturally, in the fall, like the Poinsettia. It is a small, inconspicuous plant called Toothed Spurge. Unfortunately, it is mostly known as a common "weed". When you look closely at the bracts and the bead shaped blooms you will see the similarities!



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