

Holiday Plants – Poinsettias

Published 11/25/19 - illustration is from the Curtis's Botanical Magazine v.63 published in 1836

Just about everyone is familiar with poinsettias and how they brighten up homes over the holidays. In recent years more and more colors have become available including marbled and speckled combinations, and if there isn't the right color one can go on-line and learn how to spray paint one to suit your decorating needs! But by far the most popular color has been and continues to be red.



Joel Roberts Poinsett filled several diplomatic posts for the United States in the early 1800's and not only was an avid amateur botanist but started what eventually came to be called the Smithsonian Institution. In 1828 while visiting the Taxco area in Mexico he found the wild growing plant, had specimens sent home, and by 1836 descendants of those plants were popularly known as poinsettias. Now you can go to box stores and buy painted bright blue ones if that's your thing.

What most people call the flower is actually a modified leaf called a bract. Whether called leaves or flowers, many reports have erroneously stated that they are poisonous, which to reiterate, is not true. An Ohio State study found that a 50 pound child would have to eat over 500 leaves to feel any harmful effects. Well, I can pretty much guarantee eating 500 leaves of just about anything at any one time would pretty much do the same thing. In addition, poinsettia leaves don't taste good, but just to be safe it's a good idea to prevent pets from snacking on leaves as this may cause temporary discomfort and cause diarrhea and vomiting. But again children and animals will not die from eating poinsettia leaves.

One reason poinsettias are so popular is they prefer many things that our homes offer. They like temperatures between 65-75 degrees to keep their blooms, need 6 hours of indirect light each day (east facing is best and don't let the leaves touch the window pane), and need their soil to stay moist but not water logged. If the soil dries out too much leaves will wither and fall off so in some rooms they may need daily watering and even misting in the warmest areas. Make sure the pots have good drainage and that's it! Easy to care for.

Poinsettias are easy to keep looking great their first year in your house but to get them to bloom in subsequent years (called reblooming) is not so easy. To rebloom a poinsettia needs trimming, changes in watering, changes in temperature, and drastic changes in lighting all at specific times throughout the year. It takes too much space to go into today so this will be a topic for later.

Several decades ago East Pierre Landscaping and Garden Center grew poinsettias for most of South Dakota. Today the majority of all poinsettias sold in the United States are grown on one ranch in California. Many things make poinsettias crowd favorites over the holidays, and if you're looking for a reason to celebrate something on December 12th (and really who isn't?), well that's Poinsettia Day held on the anniversary of Poinsett's death.

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