

## **Poinsettias brighten the Christmas Season**

The poinsettia is a highly prized Christmas plant. It is almost exclusively sold only during the Christmas Season.

The poinsettia was first introduced into the United States by our first ambassador to Mexico, Joel Poinsett. He had some sent to his home in Greenville, South Carolina in 1825. This Christmas flower has since borne his name.

The showy red parts, often called flowers, are not really parts of the flower. Instead, they are modified petal-like leaves, which botanists call bracts. The colorful bracts are formed below each flower. The true flowers are the somewhat inconspicuous small, green and yellow structures found in the center of the bracts.

When purchasing poinsettias, select plants that have green foliage nearly to the soil line. Older plants will usually have excessive leaf drop. The bracts should be large and extend over the lower green foliage. The most popular color in poinsettias is red. However, there are numerous shades of whites, pinks, purples and color combinations. Select only plants with small tight green button-like flower parts in the center of the bracts. These little buttons will eventually develop into the open yellow flowers. The display life will be shorter when flowers are showing lots of yellow and that are already producing pollen.

Poinsettias are predominately greenhouse grown as pot plants for Christmas in most of the United States. In South Florida they can be used as colorful landscape shrubs. In North Florida they may be frozen to the ground before flowering so are best used as pot plants. However, some people do carry the plants over here as container plants outdoors in protected areas of the landscape or by bringing them inside on cold nights.

Poinsettias can be used as cut flowers. To do so, the bracts need to be treated to coagulate the milky sap and reduce wilting. Immerse the cut end of the stem in hot water for one minute and then place immediately in cold water. An alternate method is to singe the cut end of the stem over a flame for a second or two and then place in cool water. Cut the flowers at least eighteen to twenty-four hours before they are to be used and store in a cool place in water.

Poinsettias help brighten the Holiday Season and can make beautiful houseplants. If the new varieties are properly watered and placed in a cool, sunny, draft free area, the bracts will remain showy for one to two months.

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