Poinsettia pointers

Thousands of poinsettias will be purchased and displayed in homes or offices during this Christmas Season. This plant’s bright red petal-like leaves and dark green foliage is especially appreciated at this time of year. In fact, poinsettias have become very popular throughout the country as symbols of Christmas.

Today’s poinsettia comes in a wide variety of colors, sizes, shapes, forms and price ranges.

In today’s article, retired UF/IFAS Extension Horticulturist Bob Black shares a little bit about the botany and history of the poinsettia. He also provides pointers on purchasing and caring for this admired Christmas plant.

The poinsettia, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, is a member of the spurge family, which includes common ornamentals like crown-of-thorns, copperleaf, castor bean and Florida's colorful crotons.

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

An interesting point about poinsettias is their "flowers". The true flowers are small, green and yellow and inconspicuous. The showy red parts, often called flowers, are not parts of the flower; instead, they are highly modified petal-like leaves, which the botanist calls bracts. The bracts are formed below each flower.

Since the purchase of poinsettias is a once-a-year thing for most people several suggestions on proper plant selection are in order.

The poinsettia buyer should do the following:

- Select a plant that has green foliage nearly to the soil line. Old plants will usually have experienced excessive leaf drop. Fluctuating temperatures, gas fumes, soil problems and plant pests also cause foliage 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 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 open flowers. If the poinsettia is already producing pollen, you can be assured that a portion of its useful display life has already passed and the bracts will begin to fade.

Poinsettias are predominately greenhouse grown as pot plants for Christmas in most of the United States but in south Florida they can be utilized as colorful landscape shrubs. In north Florida they may be frozen to the ground before flowering so are best used as pot plants.

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

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Extension Agent, Horticulture, November 28, 2006