



Poinsettias have been a holiday season staple since the early 1830's, although not as readily available as today. Originally found in the mountain regions of Mexico and Guatemala, these plants are actually perennials called *Euphorbia pulcherrima* and can easily grow to large shrub or small tree size in their native habitat. They were given the name poinsettia in honor of the avid plant collector and first ambassador to Mexico, Joel Poinsett, who first introduced it to the US during the late 1820's. One of the first growers to receive, propagate and raise these beautiful plants was the Ecke family in California, who today still remain in the forefront of the poinsettia industry. Throughout the past 170 or so years, there have been numerous advancements in color and form and the easy care has shown these holiday plants to be great house dwellers year-round. In addition to being great potted plants, the colorful poinsettia bracts can be used as cut flowers - if handled correctly after cutting, they will last a week or so.

The structure of the poinsettia has, at one point or another, confused those enjoying its beauty. We have all (mistakenly) called the brightly colored portion of the plant the flowers. Let's chalk that up to an oversight due to our exuberance in seeing flashes of brilliant color during this, often drab colored, time of the year. In reality, the colored bracts are modified leaves that surround the small yellow or greenish center flowers. Coloring on these bracts can range from purple and burgundy to salmon, red, pink, and white. Some offer variegations that may be speckled, having a soft airbrushed look to them – the Monet and Monet Twilight are popular poinsettias that exhibit this coloring. Others may be so startling that it appears as though someone has taken a paintbrush and flecked them with glitter – Jingle Bells and the Shimmer series are good examples of this style. Another popular coloration has more of a streaked appearance, often looking like colored marble on the bracts and sometimes the leaves – not surprisingly some of names have “marble” in them like Marblestar. Strawberries 'N Cream and Holly Point are two other marble types that can often be found in retail establishments. Finding a particular variety may be a challenge. Be aware that you need to be asking for them almost a year in advance in order for the growers to have what you request. With so many glorious choices, finding something bright and cheery will not be difficult.

Care of poinsettias is not difficult. The first thing to do, to insure that your care is time well spent, is choose a good quality plant. Buy from a grower or retail establishment that gives the plant enough space to stretch their branches

– keeping them too close together will cause leaf drop and potential health problems. Check the soil in the pot. Don't buy any that are waterlogged or too dry (wilted leaves and bracts are a good visual clue) and look for any sign of insect pest activity. The stems should be strong with full leafing from the base up to the colored bracts. The flowers (those small yellowish clusters at the center of the colored bracts) should be visible, yet not past good color. After choosing and purchasing, make sure that the plants are completely covered and well wrapped prior to taking them outside. If the weather is wicked, it would be a good idea to warm the car up a bit before placing the poinsettias in for the trip home. Full and healthy plants may be a bit top heavy and do have the potential to tip over. Carefully lay them on their side with the base of the pot facing toward or resting against the seat back. Propping the pot base with towels will keep them from rolling about, preventing breakage. If transported carefully, breakage should not be a problem. As soon as you get the poinsettia(s) home, punch some holes in the bottom of the decorative wrap to allow water to drain out. Standing water around the roots will cause yellowing and eventual leaf and bract drop. When watering, use room temperature water when the top ½” is dry to the touch. Allow the excess water to drain out through the bottom and check after 5 or 10 minutes to make sure there is nothing left standing in the dish. Pour out excess. Poinsettias require about six hours of bright, diffused sunlight per day. Keep them out of direct sunlight and drafts – warm and cold – and do not allow the leaves or bracts to come in direct contact with window panes as damage will result. Fertilizing is not necessary until after the blooms have faded. At that point, you can use a balanced fertilizer as directed on the container, to keep them fed and healthy. Air temperatures between 68 and 70 degrees will make these plants very happy. Be careful to keep temperatures above 50 degrees at all times – even during transporting – as exposure to low temps will cause permanent damage to the leaves and bracts.

Using poinsettias in different arrangements can be fun and interesting. As fresh flowers, they can be mixed in with any other flowers or greens in holiday arrangements - with just a bit of special handling. After cutting the bracts, sear the ends with a lit candle or lighter for about five seconds, then immediately place them into slightly warmer than room temperature water. These cut and prepared poinsettias can also be placed into small floral tubes and added to existing houseplants to festive-up any room. If you have a favorite decorative garden container that has been emptied for the season, use it to make a live indoor arrangement using a mix of potted poinsettias and houseplants. Ivy or

pothos are good choices for a draping effect, dracaenas or ferns work well for height and color. For a 14" or 16" container, you will need three or four 4"- 6" potted plants. After disinfecting the container, place enough sterilized potting mix in the bottom to bring the potted plants up to the rim when placed in. Carefully remove and place the plants into the container, filling with more potting mix as needed. Using fresh greens, ribbon, or cut flowers (that have been prepared and put into small flower tubes), gently insert them around the plants to fill in the spaces.

For some reason, poinsettias have developed a reputation for being poisonous – they are not. They do secrete a white sap that may cause allergic reactions. But as with most allergies, it is dependent on individual susceptibility levels. To be on the safe side, if some of the sap does get onto the skin, just gently wash it off with warm, soapy water. And as a general rule, keeping any houseplant parts out of the mouths of kids and pets is a good preventative measure.