

The History and Care of Poinsettias

AGRI-VIEWS

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In the 1820's, President John Quincy Adams appointed Joel Roberts Poinsett as the first United States Ambassador to Mexico. Ambassador Poinsett was very interested in botany and spent considerable time wandering the countryside looking for new plant species. In 1828, in one of his collecting trips south of Mexico City, he encountered a shrub with large red flowers growing next to the road. He took cuttings from the plant and brought them back to his greenhouse in South Carolina.

It didn't take long for people to become interested in this plant, scientifically known as *Euphorbia pulcherrima*. Because of its growing popularity, an early scientific historian by the name of William Prescott was asked to give the plant a common name. He felt it very appropriate to name it after the statesman that brought it to the United States and called it the poinsettia, after Joel Roberts Poinsett.

In the early 1900's the Ecke family of Southern California grew and sold poinsettias as landscape plants. As the plants were native to Mexico they were well suited to Southern California where they were not exposed to freezing temperatures which the plants could not survive. As interest in the plant grew, and especially its habit of blooming around Christmas time, the Ecke family started growing it in greenhouses and is still recognized as a leader in production of poinsettias and developing new cultivars.

The original poinsettias were red and fairly large. They were very sensitive to combinations of day length and temperatures which were needed to trigger the flowering process. The true flowers of the plant are quite small and located in the center of all those brightly colored "petals". In reality they aren't petals but modified leaves, or bracts, that change color as the plant starts to bloom. Today poinsettias are available in many different colors and forms. Large traditional varieties are still available but many different sizes are now available that will fit well into any space, large or small. Annual sales of poinsettias are currently estimated at over \$250 million!

The newer cultivars are also not quite as sensitive to day length and temperatures to initiate blooming, but they are still a tropical plant and require a certain amount of care. You need to protect the plant from cold weather, especially in the process of transporting it from the store to your home. Once you get your poinsettia home, put it where it will get bright light but not be exposed to cold drafts from doors or windows, or where it will get heat from furnace vents. Both of these extremes will shorten bloom life for the plant.

While temperature is important, watering is crucial! The first thing when you get your poinsettia home make sure that there is good drainage so water can flow through. If the pot is wrapped in foil, but the pot in a saucer and then punch holes in the foil. Waterlogged soils will cause root rot. Check the soil daily and water when it's dry to the touch. If the plant wilts even a little, all those pretty colored leaves will fall off, even if you water it right away when you notice it is dry. They truly are that sensitive.

Poinsettias are a wonderful holiday plant with a great history. For many of us, it just isn't Christmas without a poinsettia. But make sure you follow those few simple guidelines to keep it attractive all season long!