

Taking Care of Your Poinsettia

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

When it comes to plants we associate with Christmas time, number one is probably the Christmas tree. But running a very close second, has to be the poinsettia! Poinsettias are a tropical woody shrub native to southwestern Mexico. Their path to the United States and Christmas is long and fascinating and involves an early US ambassador to Mexico. Over the years there have been a lot of breeding advancements made with poinsettias which have introduced all sorts of amazing colors, more compact plants and plants that are easier to get to bloom and rebloom. Regardless of all these changes though, there are still some very important things you need to do when taking care of your poinsettia to obtain optimum enjoyment and life out of the plant!

First of all, the actual poinsettia flower is very small and in the middle of all that spectacular color. The majority of the color that you see in a poinsettia comes from modified leaves or bracts. As length of day and night change in the fall, these bracts start to change color. In the middle of those bracts is the true flower. The flowers are green, have no petals and bloom with yellow flower parts and pollen.

Remember that I said that poinsettias are actually a tropical plant. They don't like cold weather. It needs a bright sunny window; the brightest sunniest spot in the house. But don't get it too close to the window and certainly don't let the leaves touch the glass! It is going to prefer daytime temperatures of 65 to 75 degrees and nighttime temperatures of 60 to 65 degrees. Temperatures over 75 degrees will shorten bloom life and temperatures below 60 degrees will cause root rot. If your windows are somewhat drafty, move the poinsettia away from them at night or close the drapes to help stop the drafts from getting to the poinsettia.

Really cold temperatures can also shock the plants and knock leaves off the plant. If you are buying a poinsettia never take it out into temperatures below 50 degrees without being protected. We used to be able to wrap them in paper before leaving the store but often now days all we have is plastic to wrap them in. Unfortunately much of the plastic is quite thin and offers very little protection. Try to get the store to double bag or double wrap it. I would also make sure that the stop to get your poinsettia be the last stop on your way home and have the car well warmed up before picking it up. Then get your poinsettia home as quickly as possible and inside where it can quickly warm up!

Poinsettias are also very sensitive to moisture in the potting soil. Too wet and they'll develop root rot. If the plant wilts even a little, it will start to drop leaves. As soon as you get the plant home you want to make sure that there is good drainage out of the pot. If it come wrapped in that festive shiny foil wrap, punch some holes in the foil and set it on a saucer. Every day, check the soil by sticking your finger about ½ inch deep into the soil. If it's dry then water it.

If you are really ambitious you can keep your poinsettia alive through to next fall and then try to get it to rebloom. If you want to try this I suggest you get a copy of our Extension bulletin on poinsettia care. One last thing you need to be aware of, the plant is not poisonous. Because it is in the Euphorbia family it once was thought to be poisonous but we now know it isn't. It isn't tasty to eat, but if a pet or child eats a leaf, it won't be a problem!