

Poinsettia Selection and Care

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

For many households, the Christmas season isn't complete without a Christmas tree, mistletoe, holly, an evergreen wreath on the door, AND a poinsettia! This wonderful blooming plant that we strongly associate with Christmas started out as a semi-tropical shrub from Mexico. Through generations of hybridizing and selection we now have an incredible array of potted seasonal plants in a plethora of colors and sizes!

Even though it has been scaled down in size, it is still a semi-tropical plant and does not like cold weather at all. Which means that when you bring it home from the store it becomes very important to protect it against temperatures below about 60 degrees. You need to make sure that it is wrapped up in some form of protection against cool or cold air. Paper is the best insulator but if plastic is used, see if it can have a double set of plastic. Make sure that the poinsettia is the last thing you pick up before heading home.

Once you get it home you want to make sure that there is good drainage out of the bottom of the pot. Historically the pot was often wrapped in bright foil, that will hold the water in. Punch holes in the foil and place the plant in a dish of some form that allows water to readily drain out. Water-logged soils can easily lead to dying roots and root rot, both of which will turn your pretty poinsettia into an ugly mess in a hurry.

On the other hand, you don't want your poinsettia to dry to the point that it starts to wilt as this will cause the plant to start losing leaves. Once a day stick your finger about one half inch into the potting soil. If it is dry at this level it needs to be watered. Use lukewarm water, or even water at room temperature. Water it until the water starts to run out of the drain holes and then discard the water that runs through. Leaving that drainage water in the drain dish will allow it to start wicking back up into the pot leading to over saturated soils.

Poinsettias are very particular about room temperature. They prefer daytime temperatures of 65 to 75 and night time temperatures of 60 to 65. These are optimal temperatures and if your home is warmer than 65 at night it's going to be okay. BUT, don't allow night time temperatures to drop below 60 as this will encourage root rot which we just talked about with overwatering. Likewise, temperatures above 75 degrees will greatly shorten bloom life and will also cause the plant to dry out faster.

Poinsettia's also prefer to be in the brightest spot in your house but also make sure that it's placed where you can enjoy it. Do not put it next to an entry door as the cold drafts from the door opening and closing are going to cause problems for it. Don't let the leaves touch cold window panes and if it is next to a drafty window be sure to move it away at night or draw the drapes to protect it from those cold drafts.

Some homeowners like to try to keep plants growing through the year and then try to get a poinsettia to rebloom. Getting a poinsettia to rebloom is a detailed process that you will need to start October 1st to have it blooming by December for Christmas. If you want to know how, contact me as we have an excellent bulletin on poinsettia care. Personally, I strongly believe in supporting the poinsettia growing business so I just throw mine in the trash come January!

When the US Ambassador to Mexico, Joel Robert Poinsett brought poinsettias to the United States in 1825 I doubt that he ever believed that the plant that would be named for him would become the holiday tradition that they have. Enjoy yours this holiday season!