

## Poinsettia History

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. Last week I talked about Poinsettia care. I'm not going to repeat that, but I just love the history of how the poinsettia came to America and got its name. In the 1820's, President John Quincy Adams appointed Joel Roberts Poinsett to be what is now known as Ambassador to Mexico. Poinsett was quite a scientist and a botanist - not really that uncommon for that era. Many educated individuals were educated in the sciences and while being diplomats, statesmen, even military officers, they maintained their involvement in their science of training. Remember, this was the 1820s - they didn't have a lot of other diversions like television, email or the internet! Ambassador, or more appropriately titled at the time Minister Poinsett would routinely travel the countryside in search of new plant species. One day, probably in the late fall of 1828 he was on a plant collecting trip south of Mexico City and he encountered a shrub with large red flowers. He took cuttings from this plant which he then took back to his home and greenhouse in South Carolina where he grew and propagated them. They obviously didn't have much for plant import quarantines in those days! It started to become a popular plant among gardeners in warm climates soon after, but didn't really take off as a Christmas plant until the 1900s. When first brought back to the US it only went by its scientific name, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*. A scientific historian in the mid 1800's was asked to give the plant a common name. He decided it was appropriate to name the plant after its discoverer, hence, poinsettia. This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

## Hardening off and winter kill

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. Warm autumns, while they are nice for the heating bill, always make me nervous. We had a warm October and a very warm November. Our first killing freeze of fall was four weeks later than average. Even as I write this, many trees still have far more leaves than they normally do. In some ways it looks more like early November than early December. Why this concerns me has to do with winter hardiness of plants. Winter hardiness comes from plants having had a chance to reduce moisture levels in the cells of above ground portions of the plant, in this case we're talking about woody perennials, a.k.a. trees and shrubs. As temperatures get colder and colder in the fall, in a normal fashion, the moisture level in branches and buds decreases. The presence of solids like starches and sugars in the plant cells essentially works as antifreeze keeping ice crystals from forming in the cells. In larger branches and trunks the sap literally moves below ground. Plants can obtain winter hardiness fairly quickly, perhaps in as little as a couple of weeks. But if we have extreme cold, temperatures into the lower teens and single digits, too quickly, we will have freezing and bursting of critical transport vessels within the bark of the tree. Unfortunately there isn't a darn thing we can do about it and cold weather is now barreling in on us. We often won't know that there was damage until next spring. Some plants may not leaf out at all. Others may leaf out, but then all the new foliage dies very quickly. Or all the new growth will come up from ground level. This is all winterkill. This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

## Dormant Seeding of Lawn Grasses

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. Now that it has finally cooled down, okay, gotten cold, homeowners can consider dormant seeding of lawn grasses. Dormant seeding is done from December through February when the ground is too cold for germination to actually occur. The whole idea is to get the seed into the ground, in a state of refrigeration if you will, so that when the soil starts to warm up in late winter and very early spring the grass seed will start to germinate and get a jump on the standard spring planting season. This normally works fairly well as long as we don't have a really early warm up that gets the seed germinating and then followed up by some bitterly cold weather that will damage those small seedlings. We don't normally seed entire lawns this way, although I have seen it done. We normally are doing small areas that are bare, sort of like the little dirt volcanos in my yard from the over zealous mole! For any seeding to be successful we need good seed to soil contact. Sowing the seed now in those bare spots and raking it in can work well. If you have large areas, sow your seed and then harrow or rake it in or use a Brillion or other power seeder to get that seed in to the ground. One trick that the old timers would do and can actually work quite well, is to sow the seed on top of snow. If it's a light snow you can still see the bare areas you wanted to seed. As the snow melts it grabs the seed and pulls it right down to the soil for good seed/soil contact. But you can spread seed on a deeper snow over a large areas if you are trying to just thicken up a thin stand. But don't use herbicides next spring. This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

Drainage issues?

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. As long as we don't get excessive snow or rain in the late fall or early winter it's a good time to work on areas of gardens that have poor drainage. Poor drainage is essentially those areas where water stands and they take a long time to drain out and dry. Long term saturated soils are not healthy for most plants. The lack of oxygen causes plants roots to die or at the very least, makes them more susceptible to various root rots. These areas also dry out more slowly in the spring delaying how soon you can get started planting. The best way to deal with these wet spots is basically change them so they aren't the lowest spot in the garden. Building them up with soil and compost or other forms of organic matter, you force the water to find another place to collect or at least move the top of the soil surface above the area that is saturated. Probably, in the end, a little of both! The warning at the start about snow and rain has to do with the need to incorporate whatever you use to fill in the low spot. If you just bring in soil or compost and dump it on top of the low spot you will succeed in raising the level of the soil surface but you will likely create other issues. If you use soil that is exactly like what is currently in place, you won't have a problem. But if the fill material is significantly different you will wind up with soil strata. Soil water and roots do not like to move between layers of soil or other material that are significantly different in structure and texture. You need to apply the fill material, perhaps in shallow layers and keep tilling it in to get it well mixed to keep your plants happy. This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

## Christmas Presents for Gardeners

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. We're a few weeks away from Christmas and if you have a gardener, a serious gardener, that you have to buy a present for, then you have my sincerest sympathies. Gardeners are very particular about what they want whether it is seeds, plants, tools or just anything. If you are lucky, they will provide you a very detailed list of what they want. If they don't provide you a list, just buy a gift card! It may sound impersonal, but it's safer in the long run. If they provide you with a detailed list, follow that list! If they are asking for a Felco F2 pruner, for heaven's sake do not buy the F7 pruner. It is different and it doesn't matter that it looks more ergonomic, if they want an F2, get them the F2. When it comes to garden tools, whether it is a saw, a pruner, a shovel or a hoe, buy quality. A serious gardener will use those tools a lot and good quality tools will last a life time and make the job much more enjoyable. I personally own quality tools and it drives me nuts to use anything other than my tools. Okay, I may be a tool snob, but once you've used the best you just can't go back to anything else! If they didn't give you a list you can try to get them some books. This can be a dicey proposition though unless you know some of their likes. If there is a favorite nursery or online supply house of your gardener, get them a gift certificate there as well. Now here's a word of advice on gift certificates or even gift cards. Think about what you consider a reasonable amount, and then increase it 50 to 100%. Things will cost more than you realize and you do want to make your gardener happy don't you? This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.