

How to Keep Your Holiday Poinsettia Blooming

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The poinsettia plant that decorated our homes during the holiday season should continue to bring us pleasure through February, with just a few tips on its care.

Keep it away from hot and cold drafts. This is a semitropical plant which prefers temperatures around 70 during the day and cooler temperatures in the 60's at night. It needs to be kept uniformly moist, possibly requiring water 2 to 3 times per week if your home is dry. Be sure that it has good drainage and does not sit in water. Placing it in a dish filled with pebbles will provide humidity and not allow the soil to become saturated with water. Placing sphagnum moss around the pot will help wick away any excess water and can be quite decorative—no Martha Stewart isn't a member (yet) of our organization!

Too much hot direct west sunlight will cause the flowers to fade, so place it in an east or south window where it can get at least six hours of natural daylight and it will thrive. Don't let them touch cold windows, as the chill will cause the leaves to drop.

Poinsettias do not need fertilizer during the holiday season, but once it stops blooming (around the end of February) a balanced fertilizer every two weeks will promote new growth, and maintain healthy foliage.

If you are in for a challenge and a dedicated gardener you may want to try to rebloom your plant.

In April, cut the stems back to about 6" above the soil line. In May, after all possibility of frost is over, begin to harden it off outside in a shady location for about 10-14 days. You may want to repot it to a bigger pot at this time in a good soilless potting mixture that freely drains. Simply dig a hole and drop the pot into the soil. Fertilize it with a 20-20-20 fertilizer as you would your other container plants throughout the summer.

In September, before we get a frost, start by spraying it with orethene to prevent whitefly infestation and check for bugs, then bring it inside. In October, because this is a photoperiodic plant (meaning they bloom when days are short and nights are long), they need a minimum of 12 hours of complete darkness each day. You can place them in a closet overnight, but don't even allow five minutes of light to hit the plant, or it will be set back by two weeks for blooming. The easiest way to do this is to put it where you can remember to place a five-gallon bucket over it at dinner (around 5:00 PM), and take the bucket off at breakfast. By the middle of November, you should start to see the bracts beginning to color. At this point you do not need to keep it covered.

By the way, the colorful part of the poinsettia is not the flower. They are called bracts and the flower is a small insignificant yellow bloom inside the bracts.

The poinsettia was named after Joel Roberts Poinsett, a physician and amateur botanist who was the first US Ambassador to Mexico during the Mexican civil war. He was responsible for negotiating the purchase of Texas; however, he is most remembered for taking cuttings from a large red flowering shrub he found along the side of the road and sending the cuttings back to his South Carolina home. There he propagated the plant giving plants to his friends and neighbors at Christmas.

The Ecke family of California in the 1900's began growing the poinsettias outdoors for use as landscape plants and cut flowers. Later they grew them in greenhouses where they are responsible for mainstreaming the poinsettia into our holiday tradition.

The name Poinsettia conjures up the idea of poison, and although it is a member of the Euphorbia family and has a white latex exuding from a broken stem that has a reputation of being poisonous, the poinsettias is NOT! A lot of research by Ohio State University and the floral industry has proven that even at high toxicity levels no adverse affects other than a bad tummy ache and vomiting will occur. The latex can however, cause a rash on exposure to skin in some individuals.

The name *Euphorbia pulcherrima* was assigned by a German botanist who saw the plant growing through a crack in his greenhouse and was dazzled by its color. Pulcherrima means "very beautiful."

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