

## **Poinsettias Help Brighten the Holiday Season**

Larry Williams\*  
December 20, 2001

**E**very year for I don't know how many years, I've purchased at least one poinsettia to enjoy for the Christmas season. This year is no different.

No other flower can make such a brilliant show of bright red throughout the festive weeks of December and January. The poinsettia is highly prized throughout Florida and widely beloved as a symbol of the Christmas season.

University of Florida IFAS Extension Horticulturist, Bob Black, says the poinsettia was first introduced into the United States by our first ambassador to Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett. He had some sent to his home in Greenville, South Carolina in 1825... and this lovely Christmas flower has since borne his name.

The poinsettia, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, is a member of the spurge family, which includes common ornamentals like crown-of-thorns, copper-leaf, castorbean and south Florida's colorful crotons.

An interesting point about poinsettias is their "flowers". The true flowers are small, green and yellow, and inconspicuous. The showy red parts, often called flowers, are not really parts of the flower.

Instead, they are highly modified petal-like leaves, which the botanists call bracts. The bracts are formed below each flower.

Here are some pointers you should follow when buying and using poinsettias for your home: Select a plant that has green foliage nearly to the soil line. Old plants will usually have experienced excessive leaf drop. Fluctuating temperatures, gas fumes, soil problems and plant pests also cause foliage drop.

The bracts should be large and extend over the lower green foliage. The most popular color in poinsettias is red. However, there are numerous shades of whites, pinks and color combinations. There's even a purple or maroon this year.

Select only plants with small tight green button-like flower parts in the center of the bracts. These little buttons will eventually develop into open flowers. If the poinsettia is already producing pollen, and showing lots of yellow, you can be assured that a portion of its useful display life has already passed and the bracts will begin to fade.

Poinsettias are predominately greenhouse grown as pot plants for Christmas in most of the United States. In south Florida they can be utilized as colorful landscape shrubs. In north Florida they may be frozen to the ground before flowering so are best used as pot plants. However, some people do carry the plants over here as container plants outdoors, bringing them inside on cold nights.

Another excellent use of poinsettias is as cut flowers. The bracts need to be treated to coagulate the milky sap and reduce wilting. Immerse the cut end of the stem in hot water for one minute and then place immediately in cold water. An alternate method is to singe the cut end of the stem over a flame for a second or two and then place in cool water. Cut the flowers at least eighteen to twenty-four hours before they are to be used and store in a cool place in water.

## Poinsettias Help Brighten the Holiday Season

Poinsettias make beautiful houseplants. If the new varieties are properly watered and placed in a cool, sunny, draft free area, the bracts will remain lovely for one to two months.

*\*Larry Williams is an Extension Agent in the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Okaloosa County.*

[\[Back\]](#)