

THE POINSETTIA STORY

The traditional Christmas colors of red and green are brilliantly displayed by the poinsettia. The poinsettia is not just our most popular yuletide plant, but it is also the most popular potted plant in terms of sheer numbers and value every year in this country. Quite a boast for a plant that is, for all intents and purposes, sold on the retail market for just a one month period between Thanksgiving and Christmas. The popularity of this beautiful plant didn't begin in our country, it started in Mexico! The poinsettia, which is native to Mexico, was cultivated by the Aztec Indians long before the Spanish conquests. The Aztecs prized this beautiful plant as a symbol of purity. They used the colorful bracts in making crimson dye. And, they made a fever medicine from the poinsettia's milk sap. When the Aztec empire fell to the conquistadors, Christmas celebrations replaced the Indian rituals. There's a legend surrounding the Mexican's use of poinsettias at Christmastime. According to legend, on Christmas Eve long ago, a little Mexican girl was very sad. She wanted more than anything to give a fine gift to the Christ child at the church service that evening. But she was very poor and had no money to buy a present. As she walked toward the church with her cousin, he tried to console her. He told her that even the most humble gift would be acceptable. So the little girl gathered a bouquet of weeds from the roadside and entered the church. As she approached the altar, her spirits lifted. She forgot about the humbleness of her gift and placed the bouquet at the Christ child's feet. Then a miracle occurred! Her insignificant weeds burst in brilliant bloom. They were called "The flowers of the holy night," and each year, at Christmastime, they bloom again. We call these plants poinsettias.

The name given this beautiful plant honors Joel R. Poinsett of Charleston, South Carolina. Poinsett, who served as U.S. Minister to Mexico in the 1830's, sent some of the exotic plants to his family. And, poinsettias have carried his name ever since. Poinsettias were first cultivated in California in 1906. Albert Ecke began producing better poinsettias. And today, new varieties are continually being developed. In addition to the original red, ...pink, white, and marbled varieties are now available. You can also buy poinsettias in different shapes such as standard branched, tree form, hanging baskets, and centerpieces. Of course, how long potted poinsettias will retain their color will depend largely on how well you care for them. Temperatures of 60 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and 60 degree nights are preferred. Cold drafts and excessive heat should be avoided. Indoors, poinsettias should receive bright, but not direct sun. And, they should be watered regularly, but not excessively. Of course, if you have questions about caring for your poinsettias or other houseplants during the long dreary winter, you can call the Extension office at 321-9660 for answers to your questions.

Ice Melters

There are five main materials that are used as chemical deicers: calcium chloride, sodium chloride (table salt), potassium chloride, urea, and calcium magnesium acetate.

Calcium chloride is the traditional ice-melting product. Though it will melt ice to about -25 degrees F, it will form slippery, slimy surfaces on concrete and other hard surfaces. Plants are not likely to be harmed unless excessive amounts are used.

Rock salt is sodium chloride and is the least expensive material available. It is effective to approximately 12 degrees F, but can damage soils, plants and metals. Potassium chloride can also cause serious plant injury when washed or splashed on foliage. Both calcium chloride and potassium chloride can damage roots of plants.

Urea (carbonyl diamide) is a fertilizer that is sometimes used to melt ice. Though it is only about 10% as corrosive as sodium chloride, it can contaminate ground and surface water with nitrates. Urea is effective to about 21 degrees F.

Calcium magnesium acetate (CMA), a newer product, is made from dolomitic limestone and acetic acid (the principal compound of vinegar).

CMA works differently than the other materials in that it does not form a brine like salt but rather helps prevent snow particles from sticking to each other or the road surface. It has little effect on plant growth or concrete surfaces. Performance decreases below 20 degrees F.

Limited use of any of these products should cause little injury. Problems accumulate when they are used excessively and there is not adequate rainfall to wash or leach the material from the area. Since limited use is recommended it is best to remove the ice and snow by hand when possible. When these products are applied, practice moderation. Resist the temptation to over apply just to make sure the ice and snow melts. Keep in mind this can damage concrete surfaces as well as the plants and grass growing along the walks and driveways. These problems are normally latent and do not show up until spring or summer.

Mouse Damage to Fruit Trees/Plants

Be on the lookout for mouse tunnels around your fruit plants. Trunks and roots of apple trees are among the favorite meals for mice. There is probably no damage yet. But if we receive enough snow to cover winter food supplies, mice will begin to feed on the lower area of tree trunks and roots. This feeding may be severe enough to girdle tree trunks and kill the trees. Mice like to hide in dead grass and weeds around the trees, especially close to the trunks. They will often tunnel near the soil surface and feed on the tree bark. You can check for mice by placing baited mouse traps in PVC or other pipe near your trees. Insert the traps far enough so that pets are unable to reach the trap. Check the stations about once a week and reset traps if necessary. Mouse damage can be severe enough to kill trees that are old enough to bear fruit. Clear dead grass and weeds away from your trees and monitor for mice if you are using mulch around your fruit plants.