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**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.

***What to Do With the Christmas Tree After Christmas***

After the holidays, many municipalities allow old Christmas trees to be placed curbside. Trees are then collected and ground up for mulch or burned. If you miss the designated date, or your trash collector doesn't accept trees, there are several options to prolong the useful life of the tree.

An old Christmas tree can be used to benefit birds, fish, and the landscape by placing it in a corner of your deck, and spreading some birdseed nearby, or tying it to a deciduous tree or post near a bird feeder. The birds benefit from having escape cover nearby when hawks or cats threaten, and the dense boughs reduce the wind chill on a cold night. Sinking your Christmas tree in a pond is an easy way to improve fish habitat and fishing. The tree serves as little coral reef, in that the branches provide substrate for water plants to grow, and cover for minnows and other forms of small aquatic life. Larger fish are drawn by the shade and the presence of prey. How do you sink a tree? Tie the base to a cinder block with a short, stout rope, and toss it in. Just be sure to get permission from the pond owner first! Using the little tree around the landscape requires clipping off all of the branches. Use the boughs to add extra insulation around semi-hardy perennials or to trees and shrubs that were recently planted. The leftover trunk may be used as a garden stake next spring. Or, cut and let it dry for a few weeks, and you will have some easy lighting firewood. Just beware that most conifer species tend to spark and pop more than hardwoods, as resin pockets in the wood make tiny explosions. This can delight the youngsters, but for safety's sake, keep an eye on the fire when burning Christmas tree logs!

***Care of Gift Fruit Baskets***

A holiday tradition is to give gifts of fruits and nuts (along with other products). Usually these are placed in an attractive basket, wrapped with cellophane covering, and brought (or shipped) to your house. It is important that the fruit contained inside is kept in cool conditions to maintain its quality for as long as possible. Thus, it is wise to disassemble the fruit basket as soon as you receive it and place the fruit in refrigerated storage. If all the products in the basket are tree fruits (such as apples, pears, oranges or grapefruit), you can place the entire basket in a cool place- around 40 degrees F for best results. If the basket contains any bananas or other tropical fruits (with the exception of citrus), remove those fruits and store them separately. About 3-4 weeks is about as long as you can expect to store these fruits without some shriveling and loss of crispness.

### ***Storing Pecans and Other Nuts***

During the holiday season, pecans and other nuts are commonly given as gifts or purchased for holiday cooking. Nuts can quickly lose quality if not stored properly. Excessive water loss can lead to shriveled nutmeats, and the fats and oils in nuts can quickly spoil – developing an off-flavor or rancid taste. Store shelled (or unshelled nuts) in the refrigerator, or preferably the freezer. Nuts quickly absorb flavors from other stored products, so store them in a tightly sealed container so they won't lose water or absorb flavors from other fruits or vegetables. A solid plastic container with a tightly fitting lid is preferred. You can use a heavy grade resealable plastic bag as well. If nutmeats are tightly sealed, they can be stored in a freezer for up to one year, but using them within six months is preferred.