

Kansas State University Cooperative Extension Office  
206 N. Griffith, Suite A  
El Dorado, Kansas 67042

## **THE GRAPEVINE**

**November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

Larry Crouse  
Extension Horticulture Agent


### **THE POINSETTIA STORY**

*Last week I wrote on how to care for Poinsettias. This week I want to share with you a beautiful story of how it came to be our Christmas flower.*

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.

### ***Dormant Seeding of Turfgrass***

The best time to seed cool-season grasses such as tall fescue and Kentucky bluegrass is September because the turf has more time to mature before spring crabgrass germination and the heat stress of



summer. Dormant seeding of turfgrass is sometimes used to help fill in bare spots of lawns that weren't overseeded in the fall. Dormant overseeding is done during the winter when it is much too cold for germination. As with any seeding program, good seed-soil contact is vital. Several methods can be used. One method is to seed when there has been a light snowfall of up to an inch. This is shallow enough that bare spots can still be seen. Spread seed by hand on areas that need thickening up. As the snow melts, it brings the seed into good contact with the soil where it will germinate in the spring. Another method is dependent on the surface of the soil being moist followed by freezing weather. As moist soil freezes and thaws, small pockets are formed on the wet, bare soil that is perfect for catching and holding seed. As the soil dries, the pockets collapse and cover the seed. A third method involves core aerating, verticutting or hand raking and broadcasting seed immediately after. Of course, the soil must be dry enough and unfrozen for this to be practical. With any of the above methods, seed germinates in the spring as early as possible. There will be limitations on what herbicides can be used for weed control. Tupersan (siduron) can be used as a crabgrass preventer on new seedings even before they have come up. Also dithiopyr, found in Hi-Yield Turf and Ornamental Weed and Grass Stopper and Bonide Crabgrass & Weed Preventer, can be used on tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass, and perennial ryegrass two weeks after germination. Dithiopyr is longer lasting and more effective than siduron. Other preemergence herbicides available to homeowners require that the turf be well established before application.

### ***Compost Pile Maintenance***

Compost piles should be turned about once per month even during the winter months. This will ensure the composting process continues and that all materials are equally composted. A compost pile is "turned" when uncomposted material is moved from the sides and tops of the pile to the center where it provides "fuel" for the microorganisms that break it down. Water may need to be added if the material you move to the center is dry. Check the moisture content by squeezing a fistful in your hand. It should feel moist but no excess water should drip out. Compress the material in the pile as best you can as excess air can slow the composting process.

### ***Poor Drainage in Garden Areas***

Winter is often a good time to fix areas in the garden where water sits and does not drain properly. Such areas often harm plant roots due to poor oxygen levels in the soil. Consider adding good topsoil so water doesn't sit. Be sure to till or spade the area to mix the new topsoil and the underlying existing soil. Plant roots do not like to cross distinct barriers caused by one type of soil sitting on top of another. Internal drainage can be improved by adding organic matter such as peat moss, rotted hay, cotton burrs, rotted silage, tree leaves or compost. This can be done by adding a 2- to 4- inch layer of organic matter to the surface of the soil and tilling or spading in as deeply as possible.

Larry E. Crouse  
Butler County Horticulture Agent  
K-State Research & Extension  
206 N Griffith, Suite A  
El Dorado, KS 67042  
(316)321-9660  
[lcrouse@ksu.edu](mailto:lcrouse@ksu.edu)