

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.

Are Pretty Poinsettias Potentially Poisonous?

It seems that every year about this time the rumor is resurrected that poinsettias are poisonous. This is NOT true. Though there may be an allergic reaction to the milky sap, there has never been a recorded case of poisoning. This rumor has been so persistent that members of the Society of American Florist have sought to dispel it by eating poinsettia leaves for the press.

In the 1985 AMA Handbook of Poisonous and Injurious Plants, the poinsettia "has been found to produce either no effect (orally or topically) or occasional cases of vomiting. This plant does not contain the irritant diterpenes which is the toxin in other members of the genus Euphorbia to which poinsettia belongs.

Don't take this to mean that we should start adding poinsettia to our salads. Lettuce is much tastier and far less expensive, except for possibly after December 26th.