



## 'Tis the Season for Poinsettias

*by Sharon Plein, UC Master Gardener*

No holiday décor is complete without the addition of poinsettias. Their brilliantly colored bracts and contrasting green foliage add a festive touch to those decked halls and Christmas trees. Although the traditional color of poinsettias is red, they come in a variety of colors. Local nurseries and stores feature varieties in white, pink, marbled, spattered, spray-painted, glitter-sprayed, and blue-dyed. They come in a variety of sizes and shapes, too. Poinsettias range from minis planted in tiny pots, to large ones planted in giant pots and bowls, all the way to standard tree forms. You will definitely be able to find a poinsettia that is the right color, size, and shape to suit your decorating needs.

When you choose a poinsettia for your home, try to find one that will look fresh and beautiful throughout the holiday season. Look for healthy green foliage down the stems of the plant. The true flowers of the poinsettia are not the colorful bracts, but the little yellow centers. Choose a poinsettia that has small green “buttons” in the center. They will bloom into the true yellow flowers of the poinsettia. Avoid plants with crushed leaves and broken bracts and stems. White milky sap appears on bracts and leaves when parts of the plants are cut or broken. Today’s wholesale nurseries carefully inspect and maintain their nursery stock, but you should be aware that poinsettia plants are susceptible to white flies, mealybugs and scale.



Poinsettia plant

After you have made your poinsettia selection, carefully take it home. Rolling around the back seat or the trunk of a car has never been known to improve the health or appearance of poinsettias. Secure your plant for the trip home by bracing the container. Most poinsettia plants today are wrapped in sleeves to prevent breaking leaves and stems. When you get home, carefully remove the wrappers or plastic sleeves and water the plant thoroughly. The plant may have been sitting in a packing container or on the store shelf for days. The soil should feel moist, not sopping wet. Do not commit poinsettia-cide by letting the plants sit in water.

Next, select the perfect place in your home to display your poinsettias. Choose a place in your home that has sufficient natural light to permit your plant to thrive. Six hours of bright, indirect light is recommended. Your goal is to keep the leaves and bracts attached to the poinsettia plant. To achieve your goal, avoid placing the poinsettias near heaters or radiators. Poinsettias are warm weather plants. They do not like drafts or being chilled to temperatures below fifty degrees. Even though many poinsettias are placed in plasticized foil wrappers, protect your furniture and flooring by using a waterproof container or plastic saucer to prevent moisture damage. Check the plants daily and water only when the soil feels dry to the touch. Those plasticized wrappers on the poinsettias will hold water, be sure to avoid overwatering your plants.



Christmas poinsettia

After the holiday season has passed, you can keep your poinsettia for the next season's blooms. Try keeping them in the container in which they were sold. Poinsettias should be regularly watered and periodically fed with a balanced fertilizer, such as a 10-6-4 blend. Poinsettias are photo-period sensitive plants. This means that shorter day periods and reduced light will cause the plants to set colorful bracts and flowers. In October, when bud formation occurs, growers initiate bract coloring by depriving poinsettias of light for 14 hours per day over several weeks. At home, try putting your poinsettias in a dark closet for 14 hours per day for two weeks. When the bracts begin to color, it's time to let them out of the closet and wait for the bracts and flowers to mature. This should occur just in time to celebrate another Christmas season. Here is one last tidbit about poinsettias to add to your knowledge base: the preferred pronunciation is "poin-set-ee-uh." However, whether you call them a "poin-set-ee-uh" or a "point-set-uh", they are equally beautiful and enjoyable.

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