



The Ultimate Christmas Flower: Poinsettias
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Native to Mexico, Poinsettias are found in wild, tropical forests from Southern Sinaloa down the entire Pacific Coast of Mexico to Guatemala in Central America. They also exist in the hot, dry forests of the Mexican interior; and can also grow in temperate coastal climates, such as the beach communities of Southern California. In some climates, Poinsettias are perennials, and can reach 10-15 feet in height; but they are not frost-tolerant.

Native peoples have used Poinsettias for a variety of cultural, spiritual, and medicinal purposes for hundreds of years. For example, the Aztecs ground up Poinsettia bracts to make a reddish-purple dye for fabrics and used the sap to control fever.

Joel Roberts Poinsett introduced the plant to this country in 1828. Poinsett was a botanist, physician, and the first United States Ambassador to Mexico. After discovering the plant in Southern Mexico, he sent cuttings of it to his home in Charleston, South Carolina. The word “Poinsettia” is traditionally capitalized because it is named after Poinsett.

Paul Ecke is considered the father of the Poinsettia industry, due to his discovery of a technique that caused every seedling to branch, resulting in a fuller plant. The Paul Ecke Ranch in Southern California grows more than 70% of all Poinsettias purchased in the U.S., and roughly 50% of Poinsettias sold worldwide. In 2012, the Ecke Ranch, family owned and operated for nearly 100 years, was acquired by the Dutch-based Agribio Group. The Ecke Ranch remains in Poinsettia production under the new ownership.

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Poinsettias are the best-selling potted plant in the United States and Canada, and the most popular Christmas plant. Most Poinsettias are sold within the six weeks leading up to Christmas, representing more than \$60 million in sales. Poinsettias contribute more than \$250 million to the U.S. economy at the retail level. California is the top Poinsettia-producing state in the U.S.

Poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) are part of the *Euphorbiaceae* (or Spurge) family. The showy, colored portions of the Poinsettia that most people consider flowers are actually colored bracts and modified leaves. The colors of the bracts are created through photoperiodism, meaning that they require 12 hours of darkness a day, for at least five days in a row, to change color. Once the plants finish that process, they require abundant light during the day to achieve their brightest hues.

The actual Poinsettia flowers, or cyathia, are located in the center of the colorful bracts. Soon after the cyathia shed their pollen, the Poinsettia drops its colored bracts and leaves. For long lasting Poinsettias, select plants with little or no yellow pollen showing.

Though once available only in red, there are now more than 100 varieties of Poinsettias -- in pink, white, yellow, purple, salmon, burgundy, and many other colors, as well as in marbled and speckled patterns. However, the red Poinsettia still dominates all other color options. "Prestige Red" is one of many colors patented by Paul Ecke and is still one of the best-selling hybrids.

Although Poinsettias are rumored to be poisonous to humans, a study at Ohio State University indicated that a 50-pound child would have to eat more than 500 leaves to experience any seriously harmful effects. However, Poinsettias, like many plants in the *Euphorbiaceae* family, ooze a milky sap which can produce skin reactions, particularly in people with latex allergies. Despite their awful taste, Poinsettia leaves have been known to be ingested by household pets, and this has caused vomiting and diarrhea. In addition, the Poinsettia sap may cause pets mild irritation or nausea. It is probably best to keep pets away from the plant, especially puppies and kittens.

Due to the pandemic, Master Gardener events will for the foreseeable future continue to be limited. We realize our public classes are valued by county residents and we are doing our best to provide virtual learning opportunities. We currently have no events scheduled, but you can find our recorded classes on many gardening topics here:

[https://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/Public_Education_Classes/Handouts - Presentations/](https://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/Public_Education_Classes/Handouts_-_Presentations/).

The Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, is open to the public open twice monthly, on the first and second Saturdays, from 9 am to noon, through the end of March. State and county public health guidelines require us to limit visitors to ten at a time (including our docents) and ask that they practice social distancing and wear face coverings. Restrooms will not be open. Check http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden for more information.

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Have a gardening question? Master Gardeners are working hard remotely and can still answer your questions. Leave a message on our office telephone: 530-621-5512, or use the “Ask a Master Gardener” option on our website: mgeldorado.ucanr.edu. We’ll get back to you! Master Gardeners are also on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news.