

How To Keep Your Poinsettia Looking Good. It Really Can Survive Until Next Holiday Season

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, Dec. 6, 2019

This is the time of year that we (Master Gardeners) get many questions about poinsettias. I will answer a couple of the most common ones.

Are poinsettias safe around pets, children?

Are they safe to have in the in the house if I have a cat?

A. Claims of poinsettia toxicity are largely exaggerated, according to the ASPCA toxic plant data base at <https://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/animal-poison-control/toxic-and-non-toxic-plants>. The plants are only mildly toxic to cats and dogs. The sap is irritating to the mouth and throat tissue, and if ingested, mild signs of vomiting, drooling or rarely diarrhea, may be seen. Since the taste of poinsettia leaves is reportedly very unpleasant, it is unlikely that a child or animal who attempts to eat or chew the leaves will continue to do so after the first taste.



Poinsettias transplanted after Christmas 2011 into a well protected flower bed by local Phoenix gardener, Ed Grant, as seen December 15, 2012 in Phoenix (Photo: John Samora/The Republic)

How do I keep it looking good all season?

A. To keep your poinsettia looking beautiful, place it in a location where it will get bright light, but not get too hot or too cold. Poinsettias like temperatures between 65 and 75 degrees. Avoid having the leaves touch a cold window, or placing the plant in

front of a heater vent, both of these will cause premature leaf drop. Their water requirements are typical for any house plant: water when the surface feels dry to the touch, but avoid over-watering, which will cause the plant to wilt and leaves to drop.

Since many poinsettias are planted in potting soils that tend to get hydrophobic when dry, I like to water by placing ice cubes on the surface of soil, but not touching the plants stems, to allow water to soak in slowly. Don't leave the plant standing in water in the saucer.

How do I preserve the plant for next year?

The plant may drop leaves after the holidays, but this is quite normal, keep watering the poinsettia whenever the soil surface is dry. In early May, cut the stems back and any leggy growth, and re-pot in a slightly larger container using new potting soil.

Water it well and place the newly potted plant back into a bright, directly sunlit window where the room stays in the temperature range of 65 to 75 degrees. Resume watering whenever the surface of the soil feels dry.

Begin incorporating a complete fertilizer once new growth appears.

During the summer you can move the poinsettia outside into a shaded area and maintain your watering and fertilizing schedule

In August, pinch back each stem by about one inch. This is to encourage a stouter, well branched plant. If the stems don't get pinched, the poinsettia may grow tall and spindly. Continue watering and fertilizing outside. When nighttime temperature gets below 65 degrees F, bring the poinsettia back inside, make sure to place in a room that does not have lights on at night. For re-bloom, poinsettias need about ten weeks with eleven hours or less of sunlight per day.

Poinsettias are a popular plant this time of year with many different colors and sizes of plants to choose from. These plants are a native to Mexico where they grow into large shrubs. The poinsettia's association with the Christmas holiday dates back to the 16th century in Mexico and a legend of a poor girl who gave the gift of a bouquet of weeds as an alter offering to Jesus. This offering miraculously sprouted into a poinsettia and from that time on the Poinsettia has been associated with the Christmas season.

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.