

ENJOY YOUR POINSETTIA FOR (AND AFTER) THE HOLIDAYS

By Ralph E. Mitchell

Mr. Poinsett would never have imagined the future industry he assisted when, in 1825, as Ambassador to Mexico, he introduced the Poinsettia to the United States from Mexico. Poinsettias are now bursting the seams of local garden centers and florists with color and variety never imagined from the original humble, but beautiful plant, the very beautiful *Euphorbia* or *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, in Latin.

Poinsettias are actually woody tropical perennials with colorful bracts in shades of red, white, and pink. The modified leaves or bracts are the colorful portion of the plant. The real flowers are insignificant, small green and yellow structures in the center of the bract cluster. Selection of an individual plant will, of course, vary with your particular color desires. Besides red, white, and pink cultivars, there are novelty types with purplish hues, speckles, colorful blotches, and rose-like braches. Poinsettias may be multi-stemmed or trained to a single-stem. Regardless, make sure that the plant is not broken and check for insects (especially whiteflies) and diseases before purchasing. In the home, Poinsettias prefer 65 degrees F at night and between 75 and 80 degrees F during the day. For best results, keep your plant in a bright location out of drafts. Water only when the soil surface is dry to the touch - Poinsettias will not tolerate wet, soggy soil. No fertilizer is required during the Holiday season. While we may think of the poinsettia as only a seasonal pot plant, keep in mind that it can make a suitable subject for outdoor culture in our area.

After you have enjoyed your poinsettia for the Holiday, keep the plant on the dry side and do not fertilize until the weather warms up outside. In preparation for planting outside,

prune off the old bracts leaving four-to-six-inch stems on each branch. Harden it off in preparation for planting outdoors by slowly acclimating it to the outside environment – from shade to part-shade, from part-shade to full-sun and then eventually to full-sun. Select a full-sun planting site that will provide a moist, well-drained soil. A very important item - locate a spot that is not near artificial light sources such as streetlights or light from windows. If the dark period required for setting flowers is interrupted, flowers will form late or not at all. Flower buds are usually set by early October as the nights become longer. Feed poinsettias monthly applications of a complete fertilizer starting in March through October. Water as needed to keep the soil moderately moist.



Pruning will also help develop a bushy, attractive plant. Prune poinsettias back to about 18 inches in the early spring. Pinch new growth when it reaches 12 inches back so that there are four leaves left per stem. Repeat this process until September 10th and no later. There must be enough time for this

final growth to mature before setting buds. Reblooming can be tricky based on potential frosts and too much artificial light. Starting the first of October, Poinsettias will require 14 hours of darkness for six-to-eight weeks to stimulate initiation of flowers.

While poinsettias are very sensitive to cold, if freeze damage occurs, prune out the truly dead portions. The remainder of the plant should recover without a problem.

One last important note: Poinsettias are not poisonous! This is a myth that has been going on for some time. In the same vein, Poinsettias are not edible and as such should be kept away from children and pets. Keep in mind that some people, however, are allergic to the sap which contains latex. Enjoy this number one Holiday plant now and maybe even next year!

For more information on all types of Holiday plants, please contact our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 941.764.4340 from 1:00pm-4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our **Plant Clinics** are available across the county:

- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** every Thursday 10:00am-1:00pm.
- **Demonstration Garden** (6900 Florida Street, PG) every Thursday 9:00am-11:00am.
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1st and 3rd Thursday of month 1:00pm-3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3rd Tuesday of month 1:00pm-4:00pm.

Monthly **Plant Clinics** are Saturdays 9:00am-12:00pm at the following locations:

- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** 1st Saturday of month.
- **Peachland Promenades Publix** - 2nd Saturday of month.
- **Home Depot Murdock & Home Depot Punta Gorda** - 3rd Saturday of month.

Ralph Mitchell is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for the Charlotte County Cooperative Extension Service. You may contact him by email (Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com). You may also contact a volunteer Master Gardener 1:00pm-4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 941.764.4340 or by email (Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com).

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4340. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

Resource:

Black, R. & Schoellhorn, R.K. (2002), Poinsettias for Florida, Indoors and Outdoors. University of Florida/IFAS Extension Service.