

Poinsettias, After the Holidays
By Francie McGowan

Now that Christmas has passed and the holidays are winding down, what will you do with all those holiday plants? Live trees can be planted outside, but plants, like poinsettias, cannot live outside in the Mother Lode. You can keep them as houseplants and, with proper care, you may be able to use them next year. Knowing where the plant comes from will provide information about the environment it needs in order to thrive.



Poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) are native to the southern Mexican town of Taxco del Alarcon and parts of Central America. The weather in this area is mild, with highs of 81 degrees Fahrenheit and lows of 55 degrees Fahrenheit. The Aztecs used the leaves (they aren't flowers, but "bracts") to make a purple dye for clothing. They used the milky sap to make medicine to treat fevers. The milky sap is what produces latex. The plant was introduced to North America by the first American ambassador to Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett (1779-1851).

The plant likes bright, but filtered light. If the temperature drops below 55 degrees Fahrenheit, the plant will suffer. It needs to be watered sparingly. Overwatering can cause fungus in the roots as well as gray mold. When the top layer of the planting medium dries out, it is time to water. You can increase the flowering period by misting the plant regularly. Feed monthly with a low nitrogen, high potassium fertilizer.

Poinsettias can be disappointing in their second year, but there are some things you can do to help them put on a good display. According to the Royal Horticultural Society of England, the following practices can help:

1. Prune back the plants hard in April, to about 4 inches, and keep them at a temperature of 55+ degrees Fahrenheit.
2. In early May, replot the plant, growing it in a light cool place over the summer - 60-65 degrees Fahrenheit is ideal.
3. Flowering and bract coloring are initiated by short winter day length, occurring naturally in December and January. So, from November onwards, plants should be put in a dark room after twelve hours of daylight and protected from artificial light sources.
4. Plants need a constant temperature of about 55 degrees Fahrenheit to color up well, so protect them from cold.
5. Commercially grown poinsettias are often treated with a growth depressant or dwarfing chemicals to obtain a compact plant, but plants grown for a second year will revert to their taller, natural growth habit.

Although poinsettias are less toxic than other *Euphorbia* species, it is best to avoid ingestion and contact with their milky sap as it may cause skin and eye irritation. The plants may also be attacked by common pests of indoor plants, such as scale insect and mealybugs.

There are new colors of poinsettias being introduced often. *Euphorbia pulcherrima* “Silver Star” is a dusky pink and variegated plant. “Lemon Snow” has pale yellow bracts, and “Cortez Burgundy” has deep plum bracts.

So, when recycling all the old wrappings and trappings of Christmas, think twice about getting rid of the poinsettias. They are beautiful and make great houseplants, even though they are only in full color once a year. Have a happy, healthy New Year!

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