

In the fall, it is time to encourage the poinsettia to bloom for Christmas. Prune one last time for fullness by the end of August, and bring the plant inside by September 29 or whenever night temperatures fall below 60 degrees. At this time the plant needs 12 hours of total uninterrupted darkness, and 12 hours of bright light for the next 6 weeks to set buds for Christmas flowering. One schedule is to put the plant in a dark unused room at 6 or 7 in the evening and take it out into a sunny location by 6 or 7 in the morning. Poinsettias are very sensitive about light and dark requirements; any variation of even a day or two can cause flowers not to form. Buds should be formed by late October, and by November 1 the plant should be placed permanently in a warm, sunny location. The poinsettia should be in full bloom by Christmas.

At Bennett's, we want to encourage the traditional use of poinsettias. Even if saving poinsettias is not for you, they will add weeks of Christmas enjoyment and color to your home, office, church, or business. As living gifts or decorating ideas, poinsettias will bring unique Christmas color and a feeling of living tradition into your life.

We at Bennett's are here every day to give individual, one to one "Helping Hand Hints".

Many gardening problems are very specific, and we couldn't possibly cover all aspects in these pamphlets. Any time you have a specific problem or need help, feel free to call. It's our job to help you be successful in your growing endeavors, and we thoroughly enjoy giving you a "helping hand."

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*Everything from the ground up...*

## Helping Hand Hints



## POINSETTIAS

# Poinsettias

## History

Poinsettias have been used through the ages in celebrations around our Christmas season. Even before Christianity, poinsettias were used in winter religious festivals and grown to decorate for kings and queens. Its natural early winter - Christmas flowering time and rich regal red coloring helped the plant to have been highly valued by many past cultures and to become a symbol of Christmas today in most parts of the world.

Poinsettia cultivation originated in Mexico, Central and South America centuries ago. When the Aztecs in South America cultivated it, the poinsettia was used primarily as a symbolic flower for royalty. The flower was also used as a pure and long lasting dye, and the plant was used as a source of latex for medicinal preparations.

Later, toward the 17th century, Franciscan monks were the first to use the flower in religious processions at Christmas. As the monks returned to Europe, from Central and South America, poinsettias were introduced to that culture as Christmas potted plants. In the early 1800s, poinsettias were first introduced to the United States by our ambassador to Mexico, Joel Robert Poinsett. The flower now carries his name in all English speaking countries.

Four feet tall, stringy plants were used largely as cut flowers throughout history until a German born horticulturist, Alberta Ecke, began breeding poinsettias in southern California in 1910. Since then, Ecke, his family, and other breeders have been improving poinsettia color, shape, and compact form. Now long lasting multiple flowering plants are available in a wide range of colors, sizes and shapes.

In our greenhouses at Bennett's, we grow several Ecke varieties as well as other new varieties in many colors and sizes. From 4 inch tall plants to 12 inch large pot poinsettias are available in pink, white, marbled white and pink, and 6 red varieties - including one with small pink flecks in the red bracts. The plants come in two forms - either "pinched", resulting in a more compact multiple flowered plant, or "straight-up" giving one large blossom per plant. The tree form is a combination of growing straight up for 3 to 4 feet then pinching to form the branching head.

## Daily Care

Poinsettia plants are often misunderstood. The red leaves that many think of as "flowers" are really just the top sets of leaves turning red. The true flowers are the inconspicuous yellow bud shaped forms in the center of the cluster of colored leaves. The "flower" or colored leaves are correctly called "bracts". With proper care, the bracts will often last 3-4 months, and the plant can be grown to "re-bloom" every year. For the bracts to recolor, flower buds must be set. Also no part of the poinsettia plant is poisonous. However plants are often treated with bug killers and other chemicals, so reasonable precautions should be taken.

Care for holiday purchased poinsettias is very easy, but to re-bloom and grow the plant from year to year requires special conditions and growing techniques. A newly purchased poinsettia should be set in an area with as much light as possible and away from a direct heat source or drafts. Day temperatures of 65-80 degrees and night temperatures above 60 degrees are ideal for maintaining blooming plants. It is important not to over water a poinsettia. The soil should dry out slightly between thorough waterings, and never allow the plant to sit in a saucer full of water. We also recommend to fertilize every other time the plant is watered using an all purpose water soluble fertilizer. Given these conditions and care, a poinsettia should last easily through the end of January.

## Reblooming

Even with special care during the holiday season and later, growing a poinsettia to re-bloom is not easy. In a house, even the brightest, sunniest window may not provide enough light to actually grow a poinsettia. So after the danger of frost is past in the spring, we recommend to place the plant outside on a terrace or patio in full sun. At this time cut the plant back about one half its size. This means removing what is left of the colored leaves and often leaving just bare stems where the leaves have fallen due to the lack of light or improper watering. New shoots will form along the stem, making a more compact dense growing plant. Continue watering and fertilizing through the spring and early fall growing season. Anytime the plant looks leggy, or tall and stringy, feel free to cut back the stems.