



Care of Potted Poinsettias

Jayne Grzebiak¹ and Edwin Mersino²

Departments of ¹Tropical Plant and Soil Sciences and ²Plant and Environmental Protection Sciences

Poinsettias are native to Central America and tropical Mexico, where they are known as the *flores de Noche Buena* (flowers of the Holy Night). The poinsettia gets its botanical name from a botanist and diplomat named Joel Robert Poinsett, who served as a United States ambassador to Mexico from 1825 to 1829.

Poinsettias of today look much different from those Poinsett found growing in the tropics. Short, bushy types have been developed for indoor holiday decoration. Intensive hybridization has resulted in beautiful new colors, including cream, yellow, peach, pink, improved reds, and marbled and speckled colors. The modern hybrids also hold their color for many weeks, so you can enjoy them through the holidays and into the New Year. During the six-week holiday season in Hawai'i, more than 300,000 poinsettias are sold.

The brilliant color of the poinsettia does not come from the flowers but rather the plant's bracts, modified leaves that are readily mistaken for flower petals. The true flowers of the plant are the small, yellow buttons, called cyathia, which can be seen in the center of each rosette of colorful bracts. In November and December, when the day length decreases, the bracts begin to form.

Poinsettia care

Poinsettia plants should be purchased last on your shopping trip so that they are not kept in the car too long. At



home, it is good to keep them near a window, where they will get bright light; however, extreme heat will wilt the foliage.

Water when the growing medium is dry to the touch. Use cool tap water, and add it until it drains from the bottom of the pot. Decorative wraps around the pots can trap water and suffocate the roots. Never allow the plants to stand in water for more than 30 minutes. Excess water causes the roots to die from lack of oxygen and root rot diseases. Be sure to let all water drain from the pots by piercing the decorative wrap or taking the pots

out of the decorative wrap before watering.

Keeping your poinsettia through the year

By March, if not sooner, move your plants outside to a spot where they will receive indirect light. Water enough to keep the plant from wilting, but don't keep the medium soaking wet all the time. In late March or April, cut the plant back to within 5–6 inches of the growing medium, reduce the amount of watering, and move it to a sunny location. When new growth emerges, fertilize with a complete, balanced fertilizer such as 16-16-16; controlled-release formulations are preferred. Also at this time, you might apply a systemic insecticide to prevent whitefly infestation. When the plant has outgrown the pot—usually about mid-May—it is time to repot it to a larger container, or transplant it to the ground. Select a pot

no more than 4 inches larger than the original pot. Use a standard potting mix, and continue fertilizing monthly.

For a fuller plant, pinch back new growth about 4–6 weeks after it first appears. Leave four to six leaves on the stem when you do the first pinch, then continue to pinch the top two or three leaves every six weeks until September. Do not prune after September 1 or around the time of repotting.

The colorful bracts form only when nights are long—12 hours or more. This means that plants must not be exposed to light at night after September 21. They must be in a dark area completely away from streetlights or house lights. If you do not have a completely dark area

outside, you can put them in an unlighted room, closet, or lightproof box each evening for at least 12 hours. They also require full sun during the day, so be sure to return them to a sunny location outside after their stay in the dark. Depending on the variety you are growing, you should begin to see colored bracts in 6–9 weeks. Continue monthly applications of fertilizer until the true flowers (cyathia) develop. The plant no longer needs to be kept in the dark or be fertilized once the true flowers appear. You may find this process to be quite time-consuming! If so, it is always good to support your local nurseries and purchase fresh poinsettias each year.