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Jay Fitzgerald

University of Nebraska, Lincoln (Agronomy and Horticulture Department), jfitzgerald2@unl.edu

Don Steinegger

University of Nebraska--Lincoln, dsteinegger1@unl.edu

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The Poinsettia

Growing poinsettias so that they rebloom is easier if you understand and follow some basic horticultureicultural and pest management procedures.

Jay B. Fitzgerald, Extension horticultureiculturist
Donald H. Steinegger, Extension horticultureiculturist

Poinsettias are the most popular decorative plants for the Christmas and New Year holiday seasons. The newer cultivars often remain colorful until spring and do not have to be discarded when they finish blooming. Following a few basic principles can bring the plants back into full bloom.

The poinsettia *Euphorbia pulcherrima* is a native to the area around Taxco, Mexico, and was introduced to the United States by Joel R. Poinsett, the first United States ambassador to Mexico. Poinsettia or *Euphorbia* is a member of the spurge family and is characterized by small flowers (cyathia) and large, brightly colored, leaf-like bracts.



The poinsettia flowers are actually small and inconspicuous. Poinsettia bracts may be either red, pink, white, yellow, or marbled; the most popular color is red. In their natural habitat, poinsettias bloom according to daylength. In their native locale, they are actually a large growing, woody shrub with a height above 10 ft.

Research indicates that poinsettias contain no chemicals commonly considered toxic; however, we do not recommend eating the plants. While most people are not sensitive to the sap, it can cause a mild skin irritation.

Environment

To prolong a poinsettia's blooming period, place the plant where it will receive a maximum amount of indoor sunlight. Avoid drafts that cause rapid temperature fluctuations and premature leaf drop. Night temperatures should be no cooler than 60°F to 65°F. Day temperatures should not exceed 80°F. Poinsettias will experience premature leaf drop at temperatures below 55°F.

Keep the soil slightly moist but not soggy. When you get a poinsettia, check to see that the soil drains adequately. About two weeks after acquiring the plant, fertilize it with a complete fertilizer according to package directions. Repeat this every seven to ten days until the plant loses its brightly colored bracts. Water thoroughly and allow water to drain through the container.

Often poinsettias are sold in a paper or plastic sleeve, but they should not remain sleeved any longer than necessary. Ethylene gas can accumulate within the sleeve and cause premature flower drop and leaf curling. Leaf drop is a common malady in poinsettias.

Disease and Insect Pests

Several insects may attack poinsettias: white flies, fungus gnats, mealybugs, and spider mites. The adult white fly is easily recognized; it is covered with a white, waxy powder and has an erratic flight pattern when disturbed. Fungus gnats are small, dark-colored flies about 1/8 inch long. They can be found either on the plant or soil surface. The adults are more of a nuisance, while the larvae tend to feed on plant tissue. Mealybugs are serious pests of poinsettias. These insects are soft-bodied and appear as a cottony mass, usually in the axis of the leaves.

Most serious diseases that affect poinsettias are soil-borne and are primarily fungi. Species of *Rhizoctonia*, *Pythium* and *Phytophthora* are the most common diseases. The easiest methods for controlling these disease organisms are by sanitation and periodic soil drenches with a recommended fungicide.

Reflowering

Many of the new poinsettia cultivars will keep their leaves and remain attractive even in summer. If the plant retains its leaves, treat it like any houseplant. Place it in a sunny location and apply a complete fertilizer containing trace elements once every two weeks. As soon as night temperatures reach a minimum of 60°F, the plant can be set outside.

If a poinsettia plant drops its leaves or is no longer attractive, let the soil dry out and keep the plant in a cool location such as a basement window ledge; it still needs some light. The temperature should not rise above 60°F with about 50 to 55°F being best. Bring the plant out of its resting stage in late April or early May and cut the stems back to about 3 to 5 inches above the soil. If there is more than one plant per pot, separate them and replant in individual containers.

If repotting is necessary, use a soil mix that is loose, porous, and well-drained. Use a soil mixture composed of three parts garden loam, two parts organic matter (peat, compost, leaf mold) and one part perlite or vermiculite. This mixture should be pasteurized at or about 180°F for 30 minutes. You also can buy a premixed, pasteurized media. If you are mixing your own soil, add one teaspoon of superphosphate or bone meal for every 2 1/2 cups of soil mixture and thoroughly mix in.

After repotting, thoroughly water the plant with a fungicide solution to prevent disease infestation. Place the plant in a light, warm place and water whenever the soil begins to dry. As soon as the night temperature reaches a minimum of 60°F, the plant can be set outside. Place the plant in a shady location for two to three weeks to allow for acclimatization and to prevent leaf sun scald, then sink the pot in a sunny location with well-drained soil. Give the pot 1/4 turn every few weeks to break off any roots that might be growing through the drainage holes.

Once the new shoots are about 1 inch long, apply a complete fertilizer containing trace elements. Water

soluble fertilizers are easiest to use. Slow release fertilizer also may be successfully used -- follow label directions. Fertilize plants at seven to ten day intervals. To prevent your poinsettia from getting too tall, pinch off or prune the growing tips when they are about 4-6 inches long. If the new shoots grow another 5 inches before late August, repeat the process. Pruning shapes the plant to form an attractive compact growth.

When night temperatures become cool, 55°F-60°F, bring the plant indoors to a sunny location. Beginning Sept. 25, poinsettias need complete darkness from 5 pm to 8 am daily. Put a cardboard box or other device over the plant to provide the "shorticulture day". Lights from any lamps will prevent normal flowering of an uncovered plant. Continue this "shorticulture day" treatment until the plant bracts show color in late November. Shorticulture days and 60-65°F night temperatures are essential for good bract development.

Poinsettias bloom according to daylength. Varieties are grouped according to the amount of time between shorticulture days and the appearance of colored bracts. Cultivars such as Amy and Lady will bloom about eight weeks after the onset of shorticulture days. Jingle Bells and V-14 Glory will bloom about 10-11 weeks after the onset of shorticulture days. Other cultivars may respond differently.

Propagation

If plants get too tall and you want to propagate them, take leafy cuttings during early to mid-August. Cuttings should be about 4 inches long and may be rooted in any pasteurized media. The use of rooting compounds will increase the percentage of cuttings that will root and the rate of rooting. Place the pots where humidity is high. A terrarium or similar structure with high humidity is an ideal location for raising poinsettias. The leaves on the cuttings should not wilt. To prevent this, reduce the amount of leafy surface by cutting some basal leaves in half--shading the cuttings. The more light the cuttings can be exposed to without wilting, the more rapidly the rooting and the more vigorous the rooted cutting. Keep the medium moist but not saturated with water. Air temperature of about 70°F by day and 60°F by night is best for rooting. Cuttings will root in about three to four weeks. Further treatment of the rooted cuttings is the same as for plants bought from commercial sources.

Want to know more about poinsettias? Try these sources:

Poinsettia Phobia Continues to Dampen the Holiday Spirit, Ohio State University research dispels the myth.

Poinsettia Purchase Primer from Southern Living magazine.

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