

Consumer Poinsettia Care

Tradition

One of the most delightful decorations at Christmas is the poinsettia. Even though poinsettias were almost unknown just 70 years ago, today they are the most popular flowering potted plant in the United States. The usual color choice is the deep, vibrant red. However, there is a wide array of other colors, including pink, white, marbled, and speckled. The colorful parts of the poinsettia, the bracts, are actually modified leaves. The poinsettia flower is small, green or yellow, and situated in the middle of the bracts (Figure 1).

Selection

Make sure you are buying a high-quality plant before you leave the store. This will help you have a beautiful plant throughout the Christmas season and further, if you want to try reflowering later. The plant you choose should have flowers that are just beginning to open, or better still, the plant should have fully colored bracts with the flower buds still very tightly closed. You can expect the appearance of the plant to decline somewhat after the flowers have fully opened and have fallen off.

The plant should appear full with uniformly dark green leaves from under the colored bracts to almost the base of the plant. The leaves themselves should be completely free of disease and insects. The plant should be strong enough to stand on its own. No ties or stakes should be needed. Before you leave the store, ask for a protective sleeve to protect the plant from wind, rain, or cold temperature as you transport it. Don't buy a plant that has been stored in a sleeve or that looks wilted when the soil appears wet. This is a condition called epinasty from which the plant will not recover. A blast of cold air of less than 50 degrees F will give a severe shock to your plant and may result in leaf drop.

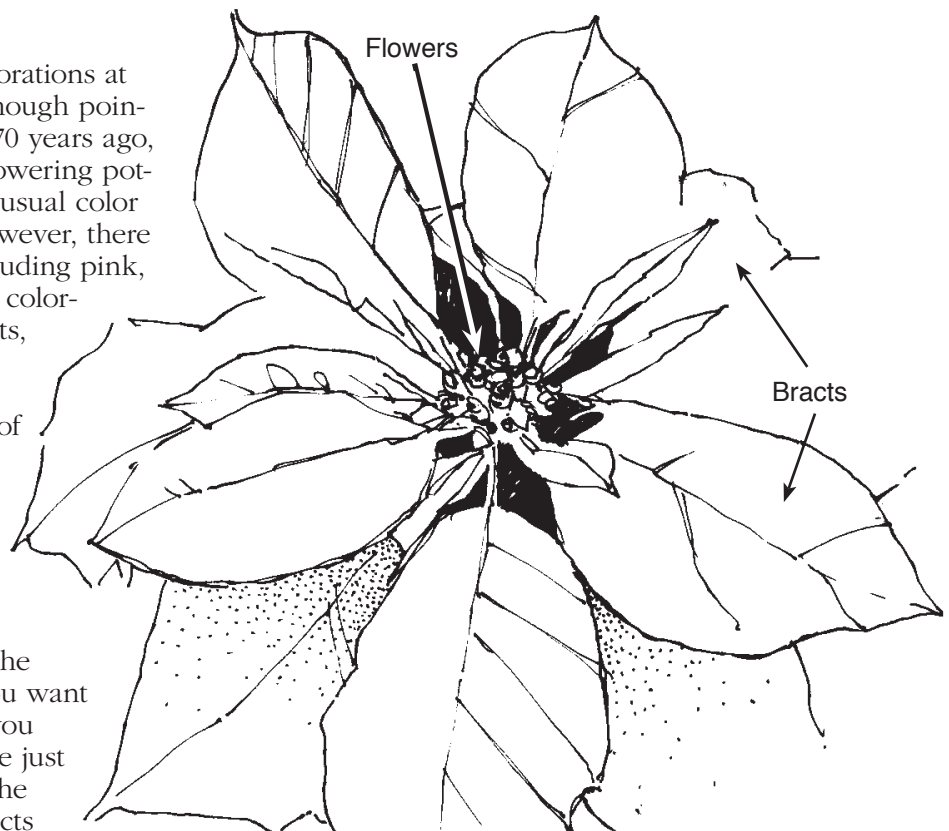


Figure 1. Flowers and bracts of a poinsettia.

Care

Your poinsettia can add beauty to your home throughout the holiday season if you place it in an optimal location for its needs. Even if such a location is not the most prominent place to display it, you can put the plant on display when you have company, but be sure to place it back into its holding area later.

Poinsettia thrives in bright, but not direct, sunlight. Put the plant near a sunny window but not in direct sunlight. Direct sunlight could discolor the bracts. On the other hand, low light can cause the plant to lose some of its leaves. Consider displaying it in a shady location like the dining room table, but maintaining it near a window.

Poinsettias will not tolerate moisture extremes. Do not keep the potting mix too wet or too dry. If allowed to dry out too much, the plant will wilt and drop its leaves. Conversely, don't allow the plant to remain in standing water. This could result in root rot, which will cause the plant to decline.

Fertilizer should not be a concern until after Christmas. Then you can use a soluble fertilizer at a rate of about ¼ teaspoon per gallon of water. This should be done once a month until April.

Poinsettias do not last long when exposed to extremes in temperature, particularly in drafty locations. This can cause overall plant decline and leaf drop. Keep the plant away from heat vents and outside doors or windows. Try to maintain the temperature at no higher than 70 degrees F. If possible, keep the plant with other plants or set the container in a gravel-filled pan half-filled with water. Doing this will keep the humidity a little higher around the plant in an otherwise dry, winter home.

Life Expectancy of the Poinsettia

The poinsettia is a perennial plant, so it can live for many years. However, the average span of time in which a poinsettia is most attractive in the home is 2 to 4 weeks. With excellent care, it could last from 6 to 8 weeks. The maturity of the plant when it was purchased also plays a role in longevity of your poinsettia.

Post-Holiday Care

If you want to maintain your poinsettia beyond the Christmas season, you will need to give it some attention on a regular basis. And, there are some critical times at which you will need to tend your plant.

In early April, cut the plant back to about 6 or 8 inches in height and place it outside in the shade. Keep the plant watered. Fertilize the poinsettia regularly when new growth begins. Pinch growing tips every 4 to 6 weeks during the summer to make the plant bushy. But do not prune any more after September 1. You can re-pot your poinsettia to a larger sized container in May. Use a potting mix similar in composition to the one in which the plant is currently growing. Bring the plant indoors before the threat of cool weather.

Re-Flowering

For the most beautiful poinsettia in your home during the Christmas season, it is usually best to buy new plants that have been professionally grown. However, some people enjoy the challenge of reflowering the plants they have kept from Christmas past.

If you have decided to accept this challenge, you need to care for your plant as described previously. And because poinsettias are short-day (long-night) plants, you must decrease the day length (photoperiod) in the autumn to stimulate flowering. To make sure that your poinsettia will be in flower by December, the day length for the plant should not exceed 10 hours. For about 8 to 10 weeks beginning on October 1, place your poinsettia in complete darkness every day from about 5 p.m. to 7 or 8 a.m. The plant must not be exposed to even a single burst of light during this dark, long-night period. During the light period each day, place the plant where it will receive bright, indirect sunlight.

Even when reflowering is successfully achieved, the plant is often of inferior quality to those purchased each year.

Whether you keep your plant for years or simply for the holiday season, during its time of greatest glory, the brightly colored bracts of the poinsettia add beauty to any home. Take care of your poinsettia and enjoy its festive contribution to the season.



ANR-894

J. David Williams, *Extension Horticulturist*, Professor, and **Becky Owens**, former Graduate Student, both in Horticulture, Auburn University

For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work in agriculture and home economics, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, and other related acts, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University) offers educational programs, materials, and equal opportunity employment to all people without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, veteran status, or disability.

8M, Revised Sept 2004, ANR-894