

Poinsettias, The Christmas Flower

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You know it's the Christmas season when you see poinsettias everywhere. To many the poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) is the Christmas flower. More than 70 million poinsettia plants are sold each year, making it the number one plant sold in the USA.

For almost a hundred years the poinsettia was believed to be poisonous, but after much research this tale has proven to be false. According to an article written by Dr. William Welch of Texas A& M, "The safety of poinsettias in the home is demonstrated in scientific studies conducted by Ohio State University in cooperation with the Society of American Florists. The study concluded that no toxicity was evident at experimental ingestion levels far exceeding those likely to occur in a home environment." Some sensitive individuals might experience nausea or vomiting if the leaves or bracts are eaten, and there are reports of mild skin irritation after contact with the milky sap.

Native to Mexico the poinsettia is a tropical plant and comes in red, pink, peach, creamy white, yellow, marbled or speckled. The "Winter Rose Series" has blooms with several layers of curly petals (resembling a wild rose) and it is said to be about a large apple size. The colors are a deep rose, rich crimson, white and marbled with a yellow center.

Since poinsettias are tropical plants they require warmth and protection from drafts and heat vents. They require at least six hours of bright light but not direct

sunlight. Poinsettias prefer a moist soil and can dry out quite quickly in a warm house. Putting the pot in a sink of warm water and then allowing it to drain is the best way to water. When the plant absorbs the water thru the roots you can easily determine from the top that it has received ample water. After flowering the plants should be cut back part way and kept dry and in a temperature of 50-55 degrees for several weeks. When the outside temperatures warm up the plant can be pruned to 6-8 inches of the soil line and started into growth again by watering. New shoots (4 inches long) can be propagated with 65-70 degrees temperature. Weekly fertilizing with a diluted fertilizer should be started when the plant is well rooted. Poinsettias seem to prefer an average temperature of 60 degrees, resent drafts and are easily damaged by spraying with insecticides. They need short days and long nights to bloom. Light at night prevents flowering and the formation of bracts. Since the flower, with proper care, has been known to hold for many months you might be lucky enough to enjoy your plant for most of the winter. If you have the smaller Mexican poinsettia that readily reseeds in your yard, you'll have an added bonus for the long, hot summer.