

Euphorbia pulcherrima (Poinsettia)

Botanical Bytes by Bruner

by Gregory Bruner



Nothing says welcome to the Christmas season like seeing a *Euphorbia pulcherrima* in full bloom. These wonderful plants are also known as Mexican Flame Flower, Christmas Star, Crown of the Andes, or yes....Poinsettia.

The poinsettia is named after the first United States senator to Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett, who introduced the wonderful plant to the United States in 1825. It is native to Mexico and Central America, which means in other locations it has only a USDA Hardiness of Zone 10. In its natural habitat it actually can grow into a 10-foot-tall shrub, typically enjoying moist or wet wooded ravines and rocky hillsides.

The Aztecs referred to this plant as *Cuetlaxochitl* and used the sap to control fevers, while the Red bracts were used to create dyes. The Aztec kings imported poinsettias into their cities at higher elevations where they would not grow naturally.

Poinsettias are one of the most popular potted plants sold in the United States and account for 85 percent of potted plant sales during the Christmas season. The fact that over 50 million poinsettias are sold every year is amazing, considering the short amount of time in which this plant is available for sale.

The red, white, pink, spotted, and striped leaves are known as bracts. The true flowers are the small yellow structures found at the center of the bracts and are referred to as the cyathia.

When purchasing a poinsettia, there are a few important rules to follow to make sure you get the most enjoyment out of your new leafy family member. Look at the small yellow flowers at the center of the colored leaves (the bracts). These should look yellowish-green and be unopened. If there is pollen on the bracts, the flowers are getting too mature and may start shedding their bracts. The roots should be moist, not too dry or too wet, which can be a sign of poor care. The displayed poinsettias should not be near open doors where the cold drafts can stress the plants. Poinsettias are very sensitive to cold and should always be sleeved and protected when taking them home on cold days.

If you are brightening up your house with poinsettias this holiday season, be careful where you place the plants in your home. They need to be kept away from drafty doors and heat registers; poinsettias do not like any fluctuation in temperature. Because at least 6 hours of indirect sunlight are preferable, a spot by a window is perfect. Be careful not to water your poinsettias too much. Remember that pretty foil or plastic pot sleeve acts as a saucer that holds all of the water near the plant's roots. Make sure you either empty the water after watering or punch small holes in the bottom of the sleeve.

Rumors about the toxicity of poinsettias are greatly exaggerated. A study at Ohio State University estimated that a 50-pound child would have to consume 500 leaves to get a stomachache. On the other hand, the milky white sap can be a skin irritant to many people.

The Legend of the Poinsettia is a wonderful story about a young Mexican girl who wanted to place a gift to the Christ Child at the altar of her church but was so poor that she had no gift of value to offer. Her older brother told her not to worry because it was not the value of the gift that was important but that the gift was presented with love. The excited girl went out and picked a bouquet of weeds growing near the church and placed them by the altar. Incredibly, her flowers turned blazing red by Christmas morning. This legend explains why in Mexico poinsettias are sometimes referred to as *La Flor de Nochebuena* or Flower of the Holy Night.

Poinsettias are a wonderful traditional way to brighten up your home during the Christmas season. By following a few simple steps, anyone can choose a healthy poinsettia and enjoy it throughout the season.