

The most wonderful flower for the holidays

No flower has stronger ties to the holidays than *Euphorbia pulcherrima*. This plant has many names: the Christmas star, lobster plant, painted leaf and the Mexican Flame leaf. Most commonly, we call them poinsettias.

The plant can have white, orange, pink and most commonly, red bracts (modified leaves). The flower is native to Mexico and is called *Cuitlaxochitl* in Nahuatl, the native language of the Aztec people.

It was traditionally used to make beautiful dyes and some still use it for this purpose today.

In the wild, this plant can grow between 10-15 feet tall. So how did it become the highest-selling plant for the holidays in the United States and can you continue to grow it after the holidays?

In 1828, U.S. ambassador and amateur botanist Joel Roberts Poinsett was visiting the town of Taxco, Mexico, when he observed the flowers growing in their native habitat. Poinsett shipped cuttings back to his hometown where they were propagated as the “Mexican fire plant.”

As the species became more popular, it was renamed the poinsettia.

Joel Roberts Poinsett is credited as the person who brought the flower back from Mexico, but Paul Ecke Jr. is known to be the person who made the flower famous. Ecke discovered a technique to make seedlings branch out. The result was fuller-looking plants and more color per pot. This discovery caused the industry around the Poinsettia to flourish.

The flower is mainly grown in California and North Carolina now, contributing over \$200,000,000 to the U.S. economy annually. Because of the importance of the poinsettia to the economy, and because of its popularity, the flower has been propagated and experimented with many times.

The result is that there are now over 100 varieties of the plant available to purchase in the U.S. and Canada.

The flower of a poinsettia is very subtle. The bright and colorful structures on the plant are actually bracts, a modified leaf structure. The colors on the bracts attract insects to the small yellow flowers in the middle of the plant, called cyathia.

The color of poinsettia bracts is created through a process called



Logan Bennett
Extension Spotlight



PHOTO BY HANNAH O'LEARY

The poinsettia now has over 100 varieties available to purchase in the US and Canada. Sales contribute over \$200,000,000 annually to the US economy.

photoperiodism, which means that the plant requires a period of darkness to change leaf colors. Poinsettias naturally do this in response to short winter days, making them bright and cheery for the holidays.

Poinsettias are part of the Euphorbiaceae family, which members commonly produce a white, milky sap. If you have a latex allergy, this sap could cause a skin rash, so make sure to wear gloves when handling the plant.

If you've purchased a poinsettia this holiday season, you can keep it healthy and enjoy it again next year. When caring for a poinsettia, remember that they are a tropical plant.

Don't keep them outside in the winter in our region. They should be kept indoors at 65-70 F. When you initially purchase the plant, remove any decorative foil or outer pots that it came in. Place the plant in the sink and water it thoroughly,

allowing it time to drain completely.

After an initial watering, keep the soil moist and water when the soil feels dry to the touch. Don't allow the plant to get dry enough to wilt.

After the holidays, you may start to see new growth. Once the plant is producing, apply an all-purpose household plant fertilizer at half strength and continue to apply once every three to four weeks.

The poinsettia will eventually revert to its natural green coloration. It can rebloom, but it's a difficult task to achieve.

In September, around the fall equinox, place your poinsettia in complete darkness for 16 hours of the day. During this time, the plant cannot receive any light. During the other eight

hours, make sure to place the plant in bright sunlight.

Maintain a temperature of 60-65 degrees at night. Continue to water and fertilize the poinsettia, but at a reduced rate. Around Thanksgiving, discontinue the light deprivation. Make sure the flower gets at least six hours of direct sunlight a day, and by the holiday season, your poinsettia will be bright and merry again.

I sincerely wish you a happy holiday season and a happy new year.

Logan Bennett is the Small Farms Program Outreach Coordinator at the Oregon State University Extension. He can be contacted at logan.bennett@oregonstate.edu and 541-236-3015.