

# Poinsettias at a Glance<sup>1</sup>

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The poinsettia, well known as a decorative potted plant for the Christmas season, will perform as a Florida landscape plant where prolonged freezes are not the norm or where a warm microclimate exists around a home. This fact sheet offers basic information on growing these fascinating plants.



Figure 1. Poinsettia

Lore and misconceptions surround the poinsettia; here are some interesting facts:

The poinsettia is native to Mexico, and the Aztecs used them in their fall celebrations. The plant's name is derived from Joel Poinsett, the man who introduced the plant to the U.S. in 1825. At that time, Poinsett was an ambassador to Mexico.

The colorful and showy “flower” is actually a cluster of modified leaves called bracts. The true flowers are small and clustered in the centers of the bracts.

Poinsettias are not poisonous, although some people are mildly allergic to their white, milky sap.

The poinsettia is a “short day” plant that blooms when days are short and nights are long. The extended period of darkness is the natural trigger for flowering. If the dark period is interrupted by artificial light from any source after October 1, flowering will be delayed or interrupted.

As a result of intensive breeding, the traditionally bright red poinsettia is now available in burgundy, pink, peach, white, yellow, and marbled colors.

## Caring for a Potted Poinsettia

Poinsettias are tropical plants and prefer a temperature range of 65°F (night) and 75-80°F (day). Inside your home, keep them in bright light away from drying or chilly drafts. They will tolerate full sun on a porch or patio but must be

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protected from frost or freezing temperatures. Water your poinsettia only when the surface of the soil is dry to the touch. Remove any excess water from the saucer or decorative pot sleeve because poinsettias don't tolerate soggy soil. Do not apply fertilizer.

## Poinsettias as Outdoor Plants

The best potted plants for establishing in the landscape are ones that have been in good light while indoors and have remained green and healthy. Red varieties usually establish better than other colors. Purchase plants that are blooming in mid-November because these early flowering varieties are ones that will also bloom earliest in the landscape. Choose a sunny spot that will not receive any artificial light at night. Plant your potted poinsettia(s) as soon as danger of frost is past. Cut off the fading bracts, leaving 4–6 inches of the stem on each branch. Fertilize with a balanced fertilizer. Poinsettias prefer moist, well drained soils with a soil pH between 5.5 and 6.5. Place the plant in the soil at the same depth it was growing in the container. Gently firm the soil around the plant and water well. Keep the plant mulched and well watered until established. Fertilize monthly, from March to October in central and south Florida and from May to September in north Florida. Prune in early spring when the floral display is over and the danger of frost has passed. Cut back to within 12 to 18 inches of the ground or to living tissue if the plant was damaged by cold. Poinsettias may become “leggy” and unattractive if not pruned regularly during the growing season. Cut back once a month, if needed, leaving four leaves on each shoot. Discontinue pruning after September 10. Flower buds will begin to develop in October. Delay or disruption of flowering will occur if fall temperatures are too warm or too cold or if the required dark period is interrupted.

## Troubleshooting

**Magnesium Deficiency** - Magnesium deficiency is a common problem with poinsettias. The symptoms are a scorching on the margins and tips of the leaves and yellowing between the leaf veins. It is difficult to correct on affected leaves but can be prevented each year by applying magnesium sulfate (Epsom salts) in February/March and June/July) at the rate of 3 tablespoons per square yard.

**Insects and Mites** - Pests that attack poinsettias include aphids, mealybugs, soft scales, whiteflies and spider mites. The poinsettia hornworm is a particularly serious problem, since it can rapidly defoliate an entire plant. If only a few are responsible for the damage, destroy them individually rather than spraying the entire shrub.

**Diseases** - Poinsettia scab (*Sphaceloma poinsettiae*) is a fungal disease that causes circular, cream-colored spots on the midribs and veins of leaves and raised, often elongated lesions on stems and leaf petioles. Scab is most prevalent in the summer, and scab-infected branches should be pruned and discarded as soon as they are noted. Plants growing in poorly drained or over-watered areas are often killed by fungi, which rot the roots and stems.

For more information on diagnosing and managing problems, contact your county's Extension Service. <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/map/>

## Interesting Websites

**The Paul Ecke Ranch:** <http://www.pauleckepoinsettias.com/>

**The Society of American Florists:** <http://www.aboutflowers.com/flower-holidays-occasions-a-parties/christmas.html>