

How to Have Happy, Healthy Poinsettias for the Holidays and Beyond



The poinsettia is the most popular decorative plant of the Christmas season. However, the compact, bushy plant we are accustomed to is far different than the poinsettia in its natural form in the wild, where it can grow to be 13 feet tall and wide.

Poinsettias are native to Mexico and Central America and were grown by the Aztecs for medicinal purposes and red dye. They were introduced to North America by the first United States ambassador to Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett, in the 1820s. Since then, poinsettias have been bred for compactness, ease of growth, and a multitude of colors.

The colored portions of the plant are modified leaves, not flowers, with red being the most common bract color. The flower buds are the red or green buttons in the center of the

bracts that open to the actual flower, which is the small, yellow part. Healthy poinsettias have dark-green leaves below the bracts and foliage to the base.

Consider these tips to keep your poinsettias healthy this season and beyond.

- * Avoid plants with insects. When purchasing, gently tap the pot to ensure there are no insects flying around. If there are, find another plant without insects to avoid contaminating other house plants.

- * Protect your plant from the cold. If it is below freezing when taking it outside, gently place a bag over the top for protection.

- * Watch how you water. Remove the plastic pot from the decorative sleeve and water the poinsettia in the sink with lukewarm water. Let the water run out the bottom of the pot. Allow the poinsettias to sit in the sink for 15 – 20 minutes to drain after watering, then place it back in the sleeve. Standing water left in the sleeve can cause the roots to rot, and the poinsettia will die.

- * Be aware of lighting and extreme temperatures. Keep your poinsettia away from heat vents as well as cold drafts. Plants thrive near a bright south or west window but will last until Christmas in lower light conditions.

- * Consider keeping poinsettias year-round. They can be grown as house plants past Christmas if given sufficient light. Remove them from the plastic sleeve and continue to water periodically. Fertilize them with any house plant fertilizer from March through September.

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