HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

CARING FOR YOUR POINSETTIAS

Seeing the thousands of poinsettias adorning the store shelves is a sure sign that the holidays have arrived. Poinsettias are a symbol of the holiday season and can be used in almost any holiday decoration situation. With proper care during this festive time, the life of the poinsettia can be extended and eventually planted in the landscape to be enjoyed for years to come.

Poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima* Willd.), native to Mexico, were brought to the United States by a man named Joel Poinsett, whom the common name of the plant was named. Poinsettias are traditionally grown as potted plants for use in the home during the holiday season. However, in Central and South Florida, they can also be used as landscape plants. They are considered woody perennials and when grown outdoors, in which they usually begin to turn color as early as Thanksgiving, just in time for the holiday season.

These holiday plants are not just offered in red any longer. Available in a wide variety of colors and forms, poinsettias can be found with red, pink, white, orange, purple, and multi-colored bracts. These colorful bracts are usually referred to as the flower, but are actually modified leaves. The true flowers of the poinsettia are inconspicuous. They are small, green and yellow nubs clustered in the centers of the bracts. Now there are even poinsettias available that have curled bracts to resemble rosettes.

Poinsettias are considered to be tropical plants. They prefer to be in temperatures no colder than 65°F. Plants that have been exposed to cold temperatures or windy conditions before they are brought into the warm indoors may have reduced quality.

When you arrive home with your poinsettias, keep them in a warm location free of drafts and cold air. If possible, place them in areas where they will receive bright light. However, avoid placing plants in extremely sunny, hot, and dry situations.

Also, remove the decorative foil wrapper from the plant's container. The poinsettias will need to be watered periodically. If the foil wrapper remains on, it can cause water to collect around the base of the plant, which is a basis for root rot. Only water the plant when the surface of the soil is dry to the touch, water them sufficiently, but not too much. Most people kill their poinsettias with too much water. Remember this plant came from the tropical desert and is more tolerant of dry conditions. It will not be necessary to fertilize your poinsettia during the holiday season. In fact, high levels of fertilizer will reduce the quality of the plant.

If after the holiday season you want to keep your poinsettias for your landscape, here are a few tips to keep them healthy and ready to be planted outside:

- Throughout the winter, keep the plants somewhat dry and do not fertilize.
- When spring arrives, cut off the fading bracts, leaving 4-6 inches of the stem.
- Begin fertilizing with a well-balanced fertilizer.
- Move the plants outdoors to a partly shady situation.
- After a week or two, plant the poinsettias in a full-sun location.

Poinsettias should be planted in areas where they receive full sun most of the day and no artificial light at night. This includes streetlights and lights coming from windows. The reason is that poinsettias need a long, dark period before they will initiate flower buds. Poinsettias will usually set flower buds in early October. If the dark period is interrupted with artificial light, even for a short period, the flowering will be delayed or the plant may not flower at all.

Poinsettias should also be planted in moist, well-drained, fertile soils. Poinsettias will not grow well in wet areas. Fertilization, irrigation, and pruning are also essential for the growing success of your poinsettias. But with proper
care, your poinsettias can provide you with many years of holiday color and cheer.

Information for this article was taken from the UF/IFAS publication Poinsettias For Florida, Indoors and Outdoors. For a free copy, which includes details on how to care for your outside poinsettias, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your call or visit, Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Have fun picking out your holiday plants, enjoy their beauty, and remember to care for them properly to extend their life span. Happy Holidays!

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Date: November 26, 2005