Poinsettias

December 2022

Plants are wonderful gifts to give and receive. There are many bulbs that can be forced (made to bloom in the house), such as amaryllis, tulips, and narcissus. Many stores will have plants for sale, such as the beautiful Christmas cactus (and its relative the Easter cactus) or plants with lovely green or green/yellow/white/pink foliage. Plants/bulbs/seeds can also be bought through the mail and online. A plant gift that is always appreciated is one that you propagate and pot. Whether it is a stem from your favorite thyme plant or that overgrown jade in your office, it will be a cherished gift, especially if you include a short history of the plant and how to care for it.

A most unique holiday plant is the poinsettia that is often seen around Christmas because they “bloom” when day length shortens. Actually, the colorful part of the plant that looks like a flower petal is a bract - you have to look closely to see the real, tiny yellow flowers. Bracts range from creamy white to pink to the traditional bright red and some varieties have bracts with patterns in red/white, pink/white, green/white and even bright orange.

Cultivated by the Aztecs of Mexico, the poinsettia was introduced in the United States in 1925 by Joel Poinsett, who discovered it while serving as U.S. Ambassador to Mexico. Native poinsettias will grow 10-12 feet high.

When you get your plant, protect it with a bag until you can get it into the house. When inside keep it between 60-70 degrees Fahrenheit to keep the color bright for as long as possible. Do not place the plant near cold drafts or excessive heat.

Place the plant where there is good light so leaves leaves won’t fall prematurely – a southern window is ideal. Don’t let the leaves touch the windowpane. Any leaves that press against an icy window will perish and the chill could even affect the health of the poinsettia as a whole.

In order for the color to last as long as possible, poinsettias require more than 12 hours of darkness during their peak bloom period. If you’ve placed the plant in a room that you keep lit all evening, just move it to a darker room, closet, or shadowy corner when the sun sets, then put it back in the window the next morning.

Keep the soil slightly moist, rather than too wet or bone dry. Poinsettias should be watered whenever the soil surface feels dry to the touch. The best way to water the plant is to move it, pot and all, to the sink and soak it thoroughly. Let it drain until no more water runs out (about an hour) and then place it back in its spot. Be sure to pull off the shiny foil wrapper that came tucked around the pot before you water it. This wrapping prevents the water from draining out, leaving the poinsettia’s soil saturated and roots soggy. Waterlogged roots stress the plant and can lead to leaf-dropping or worse.

Try keeping your poinsettia for the following season. When your plant's leaves are dropping off, let it dry out and water only enough to keep it slightly moist. Feed every two weeks with an all-purpose houseplant fertilizer. Prune the stems back to six inches when the plant begins to get leggy and keep it in a sunny spot that’s about 65 degrees Fahrenheit. New shoots will develop at the buds below the cuts. Repot in a new pot about two inches wider and an inch or two deeper than your current pot to give roots room to grow and stimulate foliage growth. By October, move it into a dark room/closet for 14 hours each night. Daily, provide six to eight hours of bright sunlight. Bracts should begin to change color by December.

Poinsettias are not poisonous, but the sticky sap may cause dermatitis or intestinal upset, so wear gloves when handling and do not let pets or humans eat the plant.

The Sage and Snow Garden Club wishes everyone a joyful holiday season full of plants. The Club’s annual activities, history, and past articles are posted on the website <http://www.sageandsnowgardenclub.org>.