

# Poinsettias

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## Enjoy them for the holidays and in the years to come

The name “poinsettia” was derived from Joel Robert Poinsett, the first US ambassador to Mexico. He was an amateur botanist who brought the plant back from Mexico in 1828 to his home in South Carolina where he propagated it. Legend has it that these striking plants were cultivated by the Aztecs for aesthetic, ceremonial and even medicinal purposes.

Botanically speaking, poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) are members of the spurge family and relatives of the rubber tree. The color of poinsettias comes from the bracts, which are actually modified leaves. Their flowers are the tiny, yellow bud-like centers.

Just knowing where the plant is native tells us much about the care that it will need. Because it is a tropical exotic, starting from the time you purchase your poinsettia, you need to protect it from chilling. When a poinsettia is chilled, it will drop its leaves. If it’s very cold outside, ask the store to wrap paper around the plant or put it in a large paper bag. If your car is cold, warm it up before transporting your new plant and get it home to a warm spot.

## Holiday care

Don’t locate your poinsettia in a drafty area, such as just inside a door to the outside. Poinsettias like 72-75° F. during the day and about 65° F. at night.

Water the poinsettia thoroughly when the soil is dry to the touch. Keep it moist, but not sopping wet while it is in full bloom. Large plants in small pots will dry out quickly, and different soil mixes will cause the drying time to vary. Fertilizer isn’t needed now.

Poke holes in the fancy wrappers to allow excess water to drain. Soggy wet roots from standing water will definitely cause the poinsettia to drop leaves/bracts. (This is a good policy for all containers wrapped in foil.)

Poinsettias are not edible, but are not poisonous when ingested. The milky sap, however, can irritate the skin. Wash your skin with soap and water if you get any of the sap on you.

## Care after the holidays

After your poinsettia finishes blooming, prune the stems back to stubs about 4 inches high. (In its natural state the poinsettia is a large shrub.) Put the pot in a cool, shady area of the house. Keep the soil almost dry. Fertilize every couple of weeks with a high nitrogen fertilizer such as a 10/5/10 combination.

When the temperatures rise to at least 65° F. in the evening, you can put your poinsettia outside. First, re-pot it into a pot slightly larger than the one in which it had been planted. The planting mix should be one part vermiculite, one part sphagnum moss and one part standard potting mix.

Select a slightly shaded area and sink the pot into the soil to help keep your poinsettia from drying out. As soon as the temperatures begin to cool down in early fall, bring your pot back indoors and put it in a sunny location.



**The majority of poinsettias sold in the United States and Canada are red,** which is also their dominant color in their native habitat. The lovely shades of cream, rose, burgundy and the speckled combinations are the result of years of work by domestic growers. *Photos by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

### **Re-blooming your poinsettia**

This takes a bit of effort and you will gain a new appreciation of the skill and planning that is involved for nurseries to provide us with these beautiful plants.

Beginning no later than September 30<sup>th</sup>, your poinsettia will need **absolute, complete darkness** 12-16 hours a day. The best location is an unused room, but if you turn lights on at any time during the dark periods, it will not work. If you cannot create this lighting situation, you can make a cover using a bucket or cardboard carton and put it on and take it off daily, or move it into an unused closet faithfully each day. (This takes commitment!)

Around Thanksgiving, check for those yellow buds and see if the bracts are starting to “color.” If buds are present, you can stop the dark period. Hooray! Don’t allow your poinsettia to dry out during this period. If you have several poinsettias, you can rotate them through this process so at least one will be “in bloom” at all times.

Poinsettias can take a bit of effort to get them to re-bloom, but the joy you’ll experience when they burst forth with their brilliant holiday color will make it worth all the trouble.

**RESOURCES:**

- *Poinsettia Trivia*, Marianne C. Ophardt, WSU Extension Faculty
- *Plant of the Month: Poinsettia*, Cheryll Greenwood Kinsley, WSU Whatcom County Extension