

Poinsettias

By Valerie Jean Rose

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Quiz time: How much do you know about poinsettias?

Poinsettias are popping up all over, bringing welcome color indoors for the holidays. As a child, I was familiar with these seasonal plants, usually appearing as gifts presented in foil-covered pots. One year my family left our snowy mid-western farm to visit relatives in central Florida. It was amazing to find poinsettia shrubs towering alongside their cottage - some over 10 feet tall! Many houseplants found in northern latitudes are the diminutive, domesticated relatives of trees and shrubs of tropical and semi-tropical ecosystems.

Meeting the potted poinsettia's southern "roots" was enlightening. How much do you know about this seasonal favorite? Take this quiz and compare your knowledge to that of Extension Service staff and faculty around the country.

1) The poinsettia was named after:

- A – The 15th U.S. Secretary of War
- B – J. R. Poinsett, a 19th century physician, botanist and U.S. statesman
- C – A cofounder of National Institute for the Promotion of Science and the Useful Art (a predecessor of the Smithsonian Institution)
- D – Poinsett State Park in Sumter County, SC

2) Poinsettias are poisonous:

- A – True
- B – False
- C – They only make you sick if you're tired of red-and-green decorations.

3) Where are poinsettias grown in the U.S.?

- A – South of the Mason-Dixon Line
- B – West of the Mississippi
- C – East of Eden
- D – None of the above

4) Poinsettia flowers are always red.

- A – True
- B – False

5) **Where do poinsettias originate?**

- A – My favorite Skagit nursery
- B – Tropical regions of Mexico and Central America
- C – The Olympic Poininsula
- D – Along the Amazon River

1) **Which of these are also names for poinsettias?**

- A – Cuetlaxochitl
- B – Flame Leaf Flower
- C – Crown of the Andes
- D – Lobster Flower
- E – Christmas Cactus



Poinsettia flowers are the small yellow parts in the center of the brightly colored “petals”, which are actually modified leaves called bracts. Poinsettias ranging from traditional red to white are grown in all 50 states. **Photo by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald**

ANSWERS:

- 1) **A, B and C are all correct.** Poinsett State Park and the poinsettia plant were named after J. R. Poinsett. Poinsett was the 1st U. S. Ambassador to Mexico, appointed by President John Quincy Adams in the 1820's. Because of his interest in botany, Poinsett looked for new plant species. Finding a beautiful shrub with red bracts, he

took cuttings back to his greenhouse in South Carolina. Though Poinsett had an outstanding career as a Congressman and ambassador, his lasting contribution was introducing the poinsettia into this country.

- 2) **B and C are correct.** In 1919, the death of a toddler in Hawaii was incorrectly attributed to the child eating poinsettia. Since then, poinsettia purveyors have been trying to correct the misperception that these plants are poisonous. The POISINCDEX Information Service indicates there is no poisoning risk from poinsettias in the home. According to the ASPCA, cats and dogs that eat any part of a poinsettia typically experience “mild to moderate gastrointestinal tract irritation, which may include drooling, vomiting and/or diarrhea.” To be safe, keep all plants except catnip and wheatgrass (which cats love to eat) away from your companion animals.
- 3) **A and B are correct.** Actually, they are grown in all 50 states. California grows the majority of the plants sold in the U.S. and abroad – one ranch raises over 80% of the country’s supply!
- 4) **Trick question!** The showy colored parts of that most people consider flowers are actually modified leaves, called bracts. The flowers are the small, yellow parts in the center of the bracts. Modern cultivars sometimes feature pink, purple, apricot or creamy white bracts in addition to the original red.
- 5) **A and B are correct.** Poinsettias are native in tropical regions of Mexico and Central America, but can now be found at your favorite local nursery - unless you want to justify a tropical vacation: “Why do I need a week off to travel to Mexico? To get a poinsettia for the holidays.” Wouldn’t it be nice to visit your houseplants’ relatives this winter?
- 6) **A, B, C and D are all correct.** In the Aztec language, the word for poinsettia is Cuetlaxochitl. The Aztecs used the red bracts to make a reddish-purple dye.

RESOURCES:

- “If Plants Could Talk: Poinsettia Care” video, George Wulster, New Jersey Agricultural Experimental Station:
<http://ifplantscouldtalk.rutgers.edu/video/video.asp?video=PoinsettiaCare>
- “The Poinsettia Pages,” Ron Wolford, University of Illinois Extension:
<http://urbanext.illinois.edu/poinsettia/index.cfm>
- Rodale’s Encyclopedia of Indoor Gardening, Ann Halpin, ed. Rodale Press, 1980

Steps to 're-blooming' poinsettias

If given good care in the home, poinsettias should remain attractive for two to three months. In March, cut the stems back to within four to six inches of the soil. When new growth appears, place the poinsettia in a sunny window. Continue to water the plant when the soil surface is dry to the touch. Fertilize every two weeks.

In late May, move the plant outdoors, placing it in a shady, protected area for two to three days. Gradually expose it to longer periods of direct sun. It should be hardened in seven to 10 days. Dig a hole where the poinsettia will get about six hours of sunlight, and set the pot into the ground. For a compact, bushy plant, pinch off the shoot tips once or twice from late June to mid-August. Continue to water and fertilize.

To initiate coloring, your poinsettia will need about eight weeks of "short day treatments." Begin the process about two months before you want colorful bracts. Put the plant in a closet for 14 to 16 hours each night, or cover it with a light-proof box. During the day make sure the plant gets bright light. Continue to water and fertilize. When the bracts at the branch tips begin to show color, stop fertilization and place it where it will receive indirect light - six hours a day is ideal. Keep the poinsettia away from cold windows and drafts from open doors, heaters or vents. For best blooming and vitality, keep the plant between 65°F and 70°F in the day, 55°F at night. Hotter temperatures will shorten bloom time, while cooler air may lead to root rot. With care and good timing, you may enjoy your poinsettia for many years.