

# Care of Your Holiday Poinsettias

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## A long-lasting plant

The poinsettia not only heralds the holiday season with its brilliant red color, but is popular for many weeks afterwards, because it is so long-lasting. Poinsettias are popular winter houseplants because they flower in mid-winter; their beauty is the result of bracts (persistent colored leaves) instead of flowers. With the right care poinsettias, remain beautiful from Thanksgiving through Christmas, and maybe even to Valentine's Day

We actually have the poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) around this time of year, because it comes to us from Mexico where, as an outdoor shrub 8-10 feet tall, it blooms annually during our winter season. Missionaries to Mexico used this shrub in their Advent ceremonies which caught the eye of our first Ambassador to Mexico, Joel Poinsett who had some shipped to his home in the states. He then also carried on the annual tradition of using them as decorations around our holidays.

To be available at our holiday season, poinsettias have been forced into bloom. They have specific needs and require extra care to keep them looking great. Here in the Pacific Northwest they are not hardy outside and are used only as indoor potted plants. Any frost or temperature below 45 degrees will kill these beautiful plants. Poinsettias are very susceptible to changes in temperature, from heating ducts or drafts from outside, and even open windows. The ideal temperature range is from 55 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit and the plants will eventually die if forced to struggle outside these bounds.

This plant is even fussy about water needs requiring evenly moist but not wet soil. It is best to give room temperature water allowing it to drain and immediately removing any excess water from the saucer. A good rule of thumb is to water only when the soil becomes dry. Adding plants nearby can help increase humidity levels in dry rooms, as will humidifiers. Place the poinsettia near a sunny window. After all, the poinsettia is really a tropical plant and needs as much direct sunlight as you can provide. Southeast, east or west facing windows are the best choice here in the PNW.

Recently, the familiar red “blooms” have been joined by a dazzling array of bright new colors. Actually, what we like best, the bright colors, are not flowers, but modified leaves called bracts. The bright bracts are designed to attract insects to the tiny yellow flowers in the poinsettia’s center.

While it is certainly easier to buy new plants each year, with some effort it is possible to get poinsettias to rebloom for the next year’s holiday season. Once flower bracts have fallen, decrease

your regular watering to allow the plant to dry out a little, but don't let it dry out completely. Beginning in late September or early October, make certain the poinsettia receives no artificial light after nightfall. Even brief periods of light from a single light bulb for one night may be enough to delay or interfere with flowering. If possible, keep the plant in a room without lights, in a dark closet, or under a fully light-proof cover from about 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. every day for four weeks. The plant must be in total darkness for about 14 hours out of every day for a four-week period to form flower buds. Keep the plant on the dry side and water only enough to keep the stems from withering.



With the right care, poinsettias remain beautiful from Thanksgiving through Christmas, and maybe even to Valentine's Day. *Photo by Jessamyn Tuttle / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

If you want more plants, try propagating poinsettias from stem cuttings. Once the new growth is from 8 to 12 inches high, cut off 4 to 6 inches for rooting. Leave at least two leaves on both the cutting and the parent stem so the plant can continue to produce food. Cut in the morning and place the cut stem in tepid water for one hour. Treat the base of the cutting with rooting hormone to increase the chance for success. Place cuttings in a well-drained, moist rooting medium, such as a half perlite, half peat moss mix. Keep humidity high for rapid rooting.

Place cuttings in bright, but not direct, light. Pot the newly rooted cuttings in a well-drained soil when the new roots are about 1/2-inch-long. Care of these small plants is the same as care for a

regular poinsettia. The parent plant and all rooted cuttings will bloom at the same time. The thicker cuttings will produce larger blooms.

According to Pet Poison Helpline and the ASPCA, the poinsettia sap does contain chemicals that if ingested by your pet may cause vomiting, drooling or diarrhea. Skin reactions such as redness, swelling and itching may also occur. In other words, sampling a poinsettia might make your pet mildly ill, but it won't kill it. Of course, that doesn't mean you should give your pet carte blanche when it comes to poinsettias. After all, you don't want it to get even mildly sick. It's always a good idea to keep the plants out of your pet's reach, and if you see that a leaf has been munched on keep an eye on your pet for any of the above signs.



Poinsettias. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Care for your poinsettia involves monitoring light, water, and temperature conditions. Monitoring humidity is important as well. Remember not to let your plant sit in water-filled saucers. You have until flower bracts have fallen, to decide if you will be keeping the plant or choosing to replace it next year.

## **RESOURCES:**

- <https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/ornamental/flowers/poinsettia/poinsettia-care-how-do-you-take-care-of-poinsettias.htm>
- ISU Extension and Outreach Guide H-406. Revised by Curtis W. Smith; College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, New Mexico State University