

Facts about Bracts

Cool autumn weather brings thoughts of upcoming holidays and of course, holiday plants. The most popular of all holiday plants is the poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*). But did you know that the lovely red flowers on the poinsettia plant are not flower petals? They're called bracts. A bract is a modified or specialized leaf from which the actual flower arises. Usually bracts are green and small and resemble the other leaves. But on some plants, such as the poinsettia, bracts are brightly colored to attract pollinators.



Red is the most common color of poinsettia bracts, but they are also available in pink, white, cream, coral, yellow, burgundy, and purple. Some poinsettias have red bracts that are speckled or brushed with pink. But on all poinsettia plants, the actual flowers are small yellow cups at the center and top of the plant.

Bracts vary widely in color, appearance, and size. They can be very tiny and inconspicuous or large and colorful. When bracts are large in comparison with the flowers, they are often referred to as a pseudanthium, which means false flower.

Bracts are more common than you might think and can be found on groundcovers, shrubs, vines, and even trees. Many plants with colorful bracts are popular house and garden plants. Here are a few common plants with showy bracts:



Calla (Zantedeschia)

White, cream, yellow, pink, orange, or red cup-shaped bracts, called spathes, surround the central yellow flower spike of calla. The white spathes of common calla, pictured here, can grow up to 8 inches long. The spathes of some varieties, such as 'Green Goddess,' are white at the base and green at the tip. Other callas have purplish blotches at the base of the spathes.

Spanish lavender (Lavandula stoechas)

The bracts of Spanish lavender distinguish this species from other lavenders. Its bracts are showy pinkish-purple "wings" that appear in a tuft at the top of each flower head. Even though there are typically only four per head, they make quite a visual impact. The actual flowers appear in rows as tiny purple and gold dots beneath the bract.





Dogwood (*Cornus*)

From the groundcover known as bunchberry to the 50-foot-tall Pacific dogwood, the beautiful "flower petals" of all dogwoods are bracts, which surround tiny flowers. Many dogwood species have white bracts, such as *Cornus alba* and *C. controversa*, but the bracts of others are pink or red.

Costa Rican butterfly vine (*Dalechampia dioscoreifolia*)

The purple bracts of this tropical vine, also known as bow tie vine, enclose small yellow flowers. Its showy bracts attract special species of pollinating bees.



Bromeliad

Bromeliads, which are members of the pineapple family, are popular houseplants. Their flower clusters are set off by colorful bracts in shades of white, pink, or red.

Bougainvillea

The bright colors of bougainvillea come not from the small inconspicuous flowers, but from the surrounding bracts. Bougainvillea bracts are often magenta, like pictured here, but also come in pure white, yellow, gold, pink, red, crimson, and purple.



Resources

[bract](#). Wikipedia. Wikipedia, 2005. Answers.com GuruNet Corp. Retrieved August 24, 2005.

Collins, Barbara. "Garden Flowers of Southern California." Retrieved August 24, 2005 from <http://ww1.clunet.edu/gf/index.htm>.

[Nongreen bracts](#). Retrieved August 29, 2005.