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Poinsettias – home care and culture no. 7.412

by S.E. Newman and K.L. Goldsberry<sup>1</sup>

## Quick Facts...

Select poinsettia plants with dark green foliage and no lower leaves missing.

Poinsettias thrive on indirect, natural daylight. Water thoroughly whenever the soil feels dry.

Ideal temperatures for poinsettias are 60 to 70 degrees F.

In order for a poinsettia to flower and undergo bract coloration, it must receive an abundance of indirect, natural daylight and have at least 14 out of 24 hours of uninterrupted darkness.

Poinsettia plant parts are not edible but are not poisonous when ingested.

December 12 is National Poinsettia Day.

## Introduction

All poinsettias are maintained easily in the home and keep their color until mid-March. The red, pink, white, yellow, bicolored or speckled “leaves” are called bracts. These bracts are modified leaves that accumulate anthocyanin pigments during proper light and temperatures. The flowers (cyathia) of the poinsettia are in the center of the bracts. The male and female parts are present, along with a yellow-edged nectary with sweet and fragrant nectar.

## Selection

Choose a plant with dark-green crisp foliage. Plants with light-green, yellow or fallen leaves generally have a root-disease problem, were over watered, had an excessive dry period, or received limited fertilization. Bracts should be well developed, with little pollen showing on the flowers. When outside temperatures approach 35 degrees F, wrap the plant well or sleeve before transporting. Low temperatures can damage leaves and bracts. Remove sleeves promptly after transport.

**Cultural requirements.** Poinsettias thrive on indirect, natural daylight. At least six hours daily exposure is recommended. Avoid direct sunlight that may fade the bract color. If direct sun cannot be avoided, diffuse the light with a shade or sheer curtain. Keep plants out of cold drafts and away from excessive heat to prolong the bright color of poinsettia bracts. Ideal temperatures are 67 to 70 F during the day and 60 to 62 F at night. Remove damaged or diseased leaves.

**Water.** Poinsettias require moderately moist soil. Check plants daily and water thoroughly whenever the soil feels dry to the touch. Plants in clay pots require more water, while those in plastic pots are easily over watered. Apply water until it runs out the drainage hole. Do not allow poinsettias to sit in any standing water. If the container is wrapped with foil, remove it when watering or make a hole for continued drainage. Discard any collected water.

A poinsettia does not require fertilization while in bloom. However, to maintain green foliage and promote new growth indoors after the holidays, apply a balanced all-purpose house plant fertilizer once per month.

## Reflowering

After a plant passes its usefulness – late March or early April – remove the bracts and a portion of the stem.

**Late spring and summer care.** “Cutting back” can be done any time through mid-July, depending on the desired size and shape of the plant. Leave three or four leaves on each remaining stem (Figure 1). During late spring and early summer, shift the plant to the next larger-sized pot; use a well-drained potting media that is heat pasteurized. Any well-drained soil media is recommended, such as a blend of equal parts sphagnum peat moss, vermiculite and/or perlite.

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Thoroughly mix one tablespoon of treble superphosphate fertilizer (0-46-0) in each gallon of soil mix. Apply a slow release fertilizer to the soil surface. Prune tall growth at six-week intervals to keep the plant formed. The last pruning and/or pinch before flowering procedures begin should be done in late August. The poinsettia is a naturally woody plant that easily can be trained into numerous shapes during the summer pruning periods. Heed the last pinching date and the darkness requirement if a masterpiece is desired for Christmas.

**Indoor care.** Place the poinsettia in a bright area where the temperature is fairly constant. Water as needed and fertilize with a complete fertilizer, every two to three weeks.

**Outdoor care.** The plant may be placed outdoors during the summer in a partly shaded area. After the danger of frost is past, and temperatures reach 55 F, place the plant on the patio or sink into the ground in a well-drained, slightly shaded location in the garden (see Figure 1). Turn the pot once a week to prevent root development through the drainage hole. Bring plants inside when night temperatures are colder than 55 F (September 1 in Colorado).

**Fall care.** Poinsettias set bud and produce flowers as autumn nights lengthen and blooming during November or December. In order to flower and develop colored bracts, a poinsettia must receive as much sunshine as possible during the day and have at least 14 out of 24 hours of uninterrupted darkness each night at temperatures between 60 and 70 F. Stray light of any kind, from street lights, pool lights or household lamps, can delay or stop the reflowering process (see Figure 2). The dark treatment (short days) should start about October and extend until color is seen in the bracts (approximately Thanksgiving). Some modern cultivars show color two weeks prior to Thanksgiving. Fertilize and water to encourage good growth.

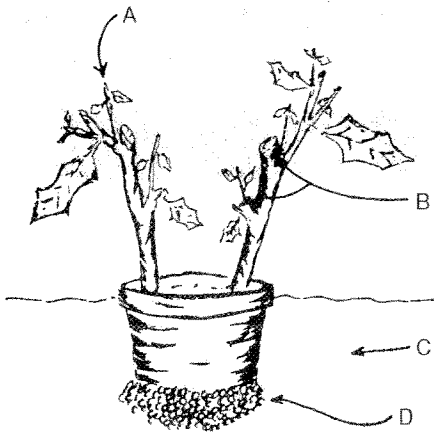


Figure 1: A poinsettia plant pruned, pinched and placed outdoors after danger of spring frosts. A: New shoots pinched in late August. B: Early summer pruning. C: Garden soil. D: Gravel

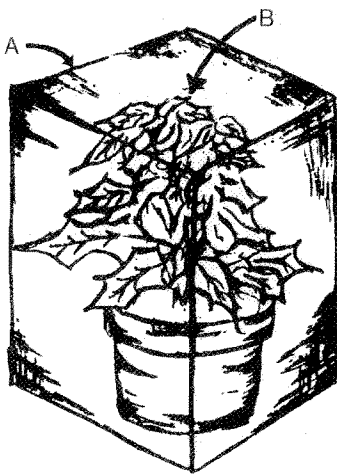


Figure 2: A wastebasket or opaque box can be used to keep the plant in darkness for a period of 12 hours out of 24 hours. Start October 1 and continue until color is showing in top bracts.

## Disease and Pest Control

Poinsettias may be infested by pests. Insects usually can be washed off with a mild soap and water solution, using a sponge or spray. Mealybugs and whiteflies may infest plants and require chemical pesticides or removal of infested plant parts. Apply rubbing alcohol with a cotton swab to remove mealybugs. Root diseases are enhanced by cold, moist-soil temperatures. If lower leaves turn yellow and fall off, root rot may exist. Apply an all-purpose fungicide as a soil drench. The milky sap that exudes from a poinsettia when damaged is called latex and is not the result of any insect or disease infestation.

## Poinsettia Not Poisonous

In a 1995 poll funded by the Society of American Florists, 66 percent of respondents believed that poinsettia plants are toxic. Research in 1971 at Ohio State University showed rats given high doses of portions of poinsettia plants were not adversely affected. In fact, the POISINDEX® Information Service, the primary information resource used by most poison control centers, states a 50-pound child would have to ingest over 500 poinsettia bracts to surpass experimental, non-toxic doses. Based on these tests, which are accepted by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, the commission denied a 1975 petition filed by a New York citizen demanding poinsettias carry caution labels that indicate they are poisonous. Like other non-food items, poinsettias are not edible and not intended to be eaten. Parts of all plants may cause varying degrees of discomfort (but not death) if eaten and should be kept out of reach of small children.

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