

Caring For Poinsettias

The Christmas season is fast approaching and most of us will either purchase or be gifted a Poinsettia. These lovely flowers say Christmas like no other. They have become the best-selling potted plant in the world. But, once we get this beautiful plant, how do we keep it looking fresh and lovely throughout the holiday season?

Make sure that the plant is well protected from the cold when bringing it home from the store or nursery. Place it in a room with as much indirect sunlight as possible with daytime temperatures about 20C and nighttime temperatures about 16-17C. Water with tepid water thoroughly but let the soil dry out between waterings.

Historically, Poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) are native to Mexico and Central America where they bloom in winter and grow to about three metres tall. Poinsettias owe their common name to Joel R. Poinsett who introduced them to the United States when he was Ambassador to Mexico 1825 to 1829. Poinsett was a scientist and a botanist and when he noticed the euphorbia with their beautiful red bracts growing wild around Taxco, he sent a few home to South Carolina for his personal collection. He began to propagate them in his greenhouse and giving them to friends. In a few years they were being sold in New York and Philadelphia.

Many of us would like to keep our Christmas Poinsettia and have it bloom again. This is possible but takes a little work. Poinsettia care begins with proper light and temperatures. While in full bloom they require a semi-cool, humid location with bright indirect light. They need to be watered thoroughly but should not be allowed to sit in water-filled saucers. This will cause root rot. If your home has arid conditions placing the poinsettia near other plants will help to increase the humidity levels.

Fertilizing is never recommended while the plant is in full bloom. If you are planning to keep your poinsettia after the Christmas season it can be fertilized once a month using a complete houseplant fertilizer.

In the spring place the plant in a sunny area and water well. All of the branches should be cut back to about six inches from the rim of the pot. It is all recommended to repot the plant at this time. When temperatures are above freezing the plant can be moved outdoors to a sunny but protected location. It can be transferred directly to the garden plot or the pot sunk into the ground. Until about the middle of August the tips of the branches should be pinched off to encourage branching.

Once the nights have become longer in September through November the plant requires approximately twelve (12) hours of darkness each day. Move the plant to a location where it will not receive any nighttime light or place a box over it. Make sure it gets plenty of light during the day. Once blooming begins give it plenty of indirect light and semi-cool, humid conditions.

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