

The Dirt on Hill Country Gardening

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Happy New Year!

Aztecs called poinsettias *Cuetlaxochitl*. During the 14th - 16th century, sap from the plant was used to control fevers, and dye was made from the red bracts.

William Prescott renamed the plant from *Euphorbia pulcherrima*. He had researched the discovery of the plant and attributed it to Joel Poinsett. Thus, the name was derived. The botanical name, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, meaning *very beautiful*, had been assigned by the German botanist, Wilenow.

Joel Poinsett was the first U.S. Ambassador to Mexico and served under President Andrew Jackson. When he was appointed, Mexico was in the midst of civil war. With an interest in botany, Poinsett searched the countryside for new plant species, and one of the plants he found and introduced to the U.S. was to become the Poinsettia.

How to carry your Poinsettia over to next year.

When the colorful bracts start drooping, dropping, and losing their aesthetic appeal, cut it back to about 8" in height. This will occur as late as April, if you take good care until then. Continue regular watering and fertilize your plant with Hasta-Gro®. This should produce vigorous new growth by the end of May. After all chance of frost is passed, your plants will do well outdoors in indirect sun through spring and summer. Continue regular watering and fertilizing through the growing season. Prune in the summer as necessary to keep plants compact, but stop any pruning well before September 1. Transplant into a larger pot in June, if you want, but select one no more than 4 inches larger than the original. Use a high percentage of organic matter.

The poinsettia is photoperiodic, meaning that it sets bud and produces flowers as the autumn nights lengthen (much like Christmas cactus). Poinsettias will naturally come into bloom during November or December. For Christmas blooming, the plants must be kept in complete darkness for 14 continuous hours each night from October 1. Stray light of any kind, as from a street light or house lamp, can delay or entirely preclude the setting of blooms.

Personal Plant of the Week. Recommended plant of the week is the Poinsettia. This beautiful, Christmas plant comes in a variety of reds, pinks, whites, splotchy colors, and even yellowish coloring. These are readily available this time of year. Look for healthy specimens that are likely on sale at this time of year. They are NOT poisonous as is often suggested, but make a colorful indoor plant.

Chores for this week.

- Spray any poor soil areas with a soil stimulant, such as Medina Soil Activator or/and molasses.
- Prepare for cold weather.
- Spread a pre-emergent, such as corn gluten meal to keep weed seed from sprouting in the late winter and early spring.

- Plant more cold tolerant plants and trees.

We encourage your questions, comments, or your own "Personal Plant of the Week" by writing David at dsteiny@ktc.com.