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Poinsettias Add Colorful Holiday Touch

Back in 1828, a man by the name of Joel Roberts Poinsett traveled to Mexico as a United States ambassador. On his return trip, he brought back with him a cutting from a beautiful plant native to the country he had just visited - a poinsettia. The plant was later named after him.

The poinsettia, which belongs to the spurge family, has become America's plant of choice at Christmastime because of its festive red coloring. However, did you know the brilliant color does not come from its flowers, but from the leaves? The true flowers are actually very tiny, yellow clusters in the center of the plant, and it's the colored red leaves, called bracts, that make the plant a sensational holiday knockout!

The poinsettia is a popular garden shrub in some of the southern states and in California where it is hardy to Zone 10. It can actually reach 6 to 12 feet tall there.

In our colder Wisconsin weather, we must grow them in greenhouses and then follow a routine of proper care at home if we expect a repeat performance of color for next Christmas.

When spring comes, cut back the stems of your poinsettia to 4 - 6 inches. This will promote new growth. Keep the plant in a sunny spot, preferably near a south window. You can transfer it to a larger container in early summer and move the container outside once nighttime temperatures are consistently above 55° and there is no further threat of frost.

Once outside, the plant should be placed in a sunny location that usually receives a bit of afternoon shade.

Make your poinsettia a compact, bushy plant with lots of bracts by pinching back the top inch or so of its new shoots every 3 or 4 weeks. Stop your pinching by the first part of August.

Once cooler, autumn weather arrives, your poinsettia should again make its way indoors to a sunny location.

To encourage your plant to flower for the upcoming holidays, you need to mimic the shorter, winter daylight hours in your home.

You can do this by putting the plant in a dark room or closet for 14 hours each night once the first of October rolls around. Since complete darkness is essential for the colored bracts to come through later on, you might want to cover the plant with a large bag or box. During the day, return the poinsettia to a sunny, draft-free spot.

After about 10 weeks, the bracts should begin turning red.

Try some of the newer poinsettia colors, too. You can now choose from white, yellow, pink, or speckled bracts.

Keep in mind these important holiday growing tips for a healthy poinsettia:

1. Place poinsettia in a sunny, draft-free spot.
2. Nighttime temperatures should be close to 65°
3. If your poinsettia has florist's foil around its pot, punch holes in the bottom of the foil to let water drain out.
4. Poinsettias should never be overwatered. They like moderately dry conditions. Water only when the top layer of soil is dry to the touch.

One last reminder involves safety. If you have toddlers in your home, keep plants out of their reach. If your plant loses some leaves, pick them up immediately and discard them. Ingesting leaves or stem of the poinsettia can be hazardous, causing abdominal cramps. The sap can also irritate the skin and eyes.

Enjoy the burst of color and beauty only a poinsettia can bring to your home at Christmastime. It adds the perfect finishing touch to holiday decorating!