



Favorite Christmas Plants

By Barbara Schuchart

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Everyone loves Poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*). They are the best selling potted plant in the United States and Canada. California is the top US producing state of Poinsettias. There are over 100 varieties, with red being the most popular. Other colors are white, pink, purple, yellow, salmon and multicolor. It was introduced into the United States in 1825 by Joel Robert Poinsett, the first US ambassador to Mexico. He got the plant from the wilds of southern Mexico, where it can grow 10-15 feet tall. December 12 is Poinsettia Day as it marks Poinsett's death in 1851.

When you pick out a Poinsettia to bring home make sure it has dark green foliage; it should not have any fallen or damaged leaves. Look at the true flowers, which are yellow and tiny in the center of the flower head. They should be unopened and the plant should not be shedding any pollen. When taking it home, be sure it is well wrapped to avoid exposure to low temperatures which can injure the plant -- even if exposed for a short time. Unwrap as soon as possible.

Place your new plant near a sunny window or some other well lighted area. It should receive about 6 hours of light daily. Keep it away from warm or cold drafts, and don't let it touch cold windows. Water only when it feels dry, and don't let the plant stand in a saucer of water. It likes daytime temperatures of 60-70 degrees, and night time 55-60 degrees.

It is a challenge to keep it for the following season but with special lighting and temperature it can be done. (Read the December issue of the Master Gardener eNews for how to keep them alive year after year.) Poinsettias are not poisonous but can cause problems for some people, as the milky sap can cause skin irritations. You should keep pets, especially puppies and kittens, away from the plant.

Another nice plant at this time of year is a Christmas Cactus (*Schlumbergera buckleyi*). It is an old favorite for many people and makes a very special gift. The flowers range in color from yellow, salmon, pink, fuchsia, white, or a combination of those colors. It is a native to South American jungles.

Keep the plant in a sunny location indoors; it likes bright indirect light and needs well-drained soil. Water thoroughly when the top half of the soil in the pot feels dry to the touch. It also requires 50-60% humidity. You can place a glass vase or tray of water near the plant. You can also make a humidity tray by placing plant in a saucer that is filled with gravel and half filled with water. The ideal temperature for this plant is 55-70 degrees.

Keep it away from cold drafts and heating ducts or fireplaces. They will keep their blossoms longer in cooler temperatures. To rebloom, they need a resting period and time outdoors from June to mid-September. Keep it in a shady or semi-shady location, and also be sure to protect from slugs.

Poinsettia and Christmas Cactus are two sure plant gift ideas that will add much joy to someone's Christmas.

The public education class schedule is done for the remainder of the year but will resume on January 4th with "Pruning Fruit Trees and Grapes." Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.