

December 5, 2018



Poinsettias, Part One
By Laurel Rady
UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

Native to Mexico, Poinsettias are found in wild, deciduous tropical forests at moderate elevations, from Southern Sinaloa down the entire Pacific Coast of Mexico to Chiapas and Guatemala. They exist in the hot, dry forests of the Mexican interior; and can also grow in temperate coastal climates, such as the beach communities of Southern California. In some climates, Poinsettias are perennials, and can reach 10-15 feet in height. They are not frost-tolerant.

Native peoples have used Poinsettias for a variety of cultural, spiritual and medicinal purposes for hundreds of years. For example, the Aztecs ground up Poinsettia bracts to make a reddish-purple dye for fabrics, and used the sap to control fever.

Joel Roberts Poinsett introduced the plant to this country in 1828. Poinsett was a botanist, physician, and the first United States Ambassador to Mexico. After discovering the plant in Southern Mexico, he sent cuttings of it to his home in Charleston, South Carolina. The word “Poinsettia” is traditionally capitalized because it is named after Poinsett.

Poinsettias are the best-selling potted plant in the United States and Canada, and the most popular Christmas plant. Most Poinsettias are sold within the six weeks leading up to Christmas, representing more than \$60 million in sales. Poinsettias contribute more than \$250 million to the U.S. economy at the retail level. California is the top Poinsettia-producing state in the U.S.

Paul Ecke is considered the “father” of the Poinsettia industry, due to his discovery of a technique that caused every seedling to branch, resulting in a fuller plant. The Paul Ecke Ranch in California grows more than 70% of all Poinsettias purchased in the U.S., and roughly 50% of Poinsettias sold worldwide. In 2012, the ranch, family-owned and operated for nearly 100 years, was acquired by the Dutch-based Agribio Group.

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Poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) are part of the *Euphorbiaceae* (or Spurge) family. The showy, colored portions of the Poinsettia that most people consider “flowers” are actually colored bracts (modified leaves). The colors of the bracts are created through “photoperiodism” (meaning that they require 12 hours of darkness a day, for at least five days in a row, to change color). Once the plants finish that process, they require abundant light during the day to achieve their brightest hues.

The actual Poinsettia flowers, or “cyathia,” are located in the center of the colorful bracts. Soon after the cyathia shed their pollen, the Poinsettia drops its colored bracts and leaves. (For longest-lasting Poinsettias, select plants with little or no yellow pollen showing.)

More than 100 varieties of Poinsettias are now available. Though once available only in red, there are now Poinsettias in pink, white, yellow, purple, salmon, burgundy, and many other colors, as well as in marbled and speckled patterns. However, the red Poinsettia still dominates all other color options. “Prestige Red” (one of many colors patented by Ecke) is still one of the best-selling hybrids.

Although Poinsettias are rumored to be poisonous to humans, a study at Ohio State University indicated that a 50-pound child would have to eat more than 500 leaves to experience any seriously harmful effects. However, Poinsettias (like many plants in the *Euphorbiaceae* family) ooze a milky sap which can produce skin reactions, particularly in people with latex allergies. Despite their awful taste, Poinsettia leaves have been known to be ingested by household pets, and this has caused vomiting and diarrhea. In addition, the Poinsettia sap may cause pets mild irritation or nausea. It is probably best to keep pets away from the plant, especially puppies and kittens.

Poinsettias, Part two - Selection and Care, will continue next week. For more in-depth research on Poinsettias, go to <https://extension.illinois.edu/poinsettia/>.

On February 23rd we will be hosting a ***Sustainable Organic Gardening*** Workshop, at the Cameron Park Community Center, 2502 Country Club Drive, Cameron Park, 95682. ***Sustainable Organic Gardening*** will help you develop a backyard food source that's cost-effective, improves your family's nutrition and food security, and offers a healthy hobby for the whole family. Whether you have a patio container garden or a quarter acre to farm, you can grow an abundance of healthy, delicious food through sustainable organic gardening practices. There is a fee for this one-day workshop, lunch included, \$25.00. To learn more and to pre-register, please visit our website <http://ucanr.edu/sustainable-organic-gardening> or call (530)-621-5528.