

5537
.07
QA55
no. 162

Care and Handling of Poinsettias

Prepared by RAY A. McNEILAN
Multnomah County Extension Agent

Poinsettias are traditional Christmas flowers whose red, pink, or white bracts (the main part of the "flower") help to brighten up the home during this festive occasion. These plants will last for a long period afterward if you handle them properly.

The length of time your poinsettia will give you pleasure in your home depends on the maturity of the plant when purchased and on how you treat the plant. The usual life expectancy for poinsettia flowers is from two to four weeks; however, with some of the newer varieties, the bracts may not drop off until late in the spring.

To check the maturity of a poinsettia plant, look for yellow pollen on the true flowers. The flower of the poinsettia is found at the base of the colorful petal-like bracts. Flowers which are green or red and fresh looking will last longer than ones with yellow grains of pollen on them.

The poinsettia you buy for Christmas has been grown at temperatures of 60 to 70° F, with a high relative humidity, in as much sunshine as possible in the greenhouse. These conditions should be simulated as nearly as possible to insure a longer keeping quality.

Place the pot in a well-lighted location where temperature fluctuations and drafts can be avoided. Direct sunlight will not harm the plant but may shorten the life of the flowers. Keep the plant from touching cold window panes to prevent bract or leaf discoloration.

Examine the plant regularly and add water when the soil surface feels dry to the touch. Frequency of watering will depend primarily on the temperatures in your home. When watering, fill the pot to the top with water and allow it to soak in; water again and allow the excess to drain out the bottom. Discard this excess water.

After receiving a poinsettia from your florist, fertilize it every 7 to 10 days to maintain its beauty. Use a complete type of chemical fertilizer such as a 20-20-20 or 20-5-10 analysis. Your florist can help you obtain this fertilizer. Do not overfertilize.

Like all soft-foliage ornamental plants which are grown in the greenhouse, the poinsettia may wilt if it does not receive satisfactory care. Wilting may be treated as follows:

WILTING

Cause	Treatment
Dry soil	Immerse the pot to the rim in water and leave until no more air bubbles rise from the soil; drain.
Wet soil*	Drain away the excess water immediately and avoid further overwatering. Check to see if drainage hole is blocked.
Drafts	Put the plant in a sheltered position where sudden or continual air drafts can be avoided.
Freezing	No cure.

* This may be due to overwatering, letting the pot stand in excess drainage water, or from using too heavy a soil mix, which retains an excessive amount of water.

Leaves may turn yellow and drop prematurely. This does not always mean that the plant is dead or dying, but suggests some part of the environment is wrong for the plant. Plants usually will respond to an environmental correction, but by the time vigor and appearance are regained, the use-situation is past. Therefore, it is best to avoid the conditions which lead to loss of foliage and foliage color. Treatment of leaf problems and loss is indicated below.

LEAF PROBLEMS

Cause	Treatment
Insufficient light	Place the plant where it will receive bright light, but not direct sunlight, from the time it is brought from the florist.
Overwatering	Avoid wet soil conditions.
Drafts	Place the plant away from radiators, heat registers, and ventilators.
Lack of nitrogen ..	Follow the fertilizing schedule previously recommended.

The poinsettia can be grown in the home after Christmas, depending on one's gardening ability. The plant can be brought back into flower again for the next Christmas, although often not with the same quality.



This is one of a series of *Fact Sheets* reporting Cooperative Extension work in agriculture and home economics, Gene M. Lear, director. Printed and distributed in furtherance of Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914. Oregon State University, Oregon counties, and U. S. Department of Agriculture cooperating.

This is not easy, though, and most poinsettia users prefer to buy new plants each year.

As the plants pass maturity, the leaves and bracts will fall. When the leaves begin dropping, stop applying fertilizer. When about half of the leaves have dropped, gradually reduce the amount of water being applied until the soil is nearly dry. The plant is then in a dormant state and can be stored until spring in a basement or dark room where the temperature will be around 50° F. Water only occasionally to prevent stem shriveling.

Poinsettias, and many other seasonal blooming plants, can be maintained as house plants. Some varieties will retain most of their foliage through an entire year, while at the same time making new shoot growth. Whatever the winter treatment, place the plant outside in the light as soon as the weather moderates and there is no danger of frost. Prune back to within six inches of the pot, repot into new soil, water, and feed to force new growth.

When the new shoots make five or six inches of growth, pinch out the growing tip, leaving at least two leaves below the pinch. As new shoots grow from the bases of the leaves and make five or six inches of growth, pinch out the growing tip of the newer shoots. Continue this practice until the middle of August to form a bushy, compact plant.

At the same time, whether the poinsettia is handled as a house plant or grown out of doors, fertilize the plant monthly to insure normal growth. Use a complete soluble fertilizer at the rate recommended by the manufacturer. If the plant is grown outside, plunge the pot (dig a hole twice the size of the pot, line it with gravel to insure the pot does not stand in a puddle of water, place the pot in the hole, and fill the hole with soil to the top of the pot) in a garden area which will receive full sunlight. In order to insure a balanced plant, give the pot a one-quarter turn each week.

During the summer growing season, insect and disease pests will need some attention. For the general run of insects, use malathion; for disease control, Captan usually is sufficient. Follow label instructions. Do not spray malathion indoors.

In late summer or early fall when the night temperatures drop below 55 to 60° F, bring the plant inside and place it near a sunny window, away from drafts. Follow the poinsettia care instructions mentioned earlier.

The poinsettia is in the same day-length group as the chrysanthemum. This means that flowers begin to form when the days are shorter, or more accurately, when the nights are longer. The chrysanthemum blooms in the fall when the nights begin to lengthen. With the dark fall and winter days of western Oregon, the poinsettia normally blooms in late fall. However, with lights inside the home a poinsettia may not receive a long enough period of darkness to start the blooming process and could stay vegetative throughout the winter. To overcome this indoor light problem, place the poinsettia plant in a completely dark area from about 5 p.m. to 8 a.m. daily until red color starts to develop on the top leaves or "bracts." Interrupting the darkness by even a few minutes may cause failure of bloom. You can bring the plant into ordinary light when the bracts begin to show color, although better results will be obtained if you wait until the bracts are almost fully expanded.

The following is a general time schedule for handling poinsettias:

Mid-September. Bring the plant inside and place in an area where drafts can be avoided and the temperature does not drop below 60° F.

Early October. Begin giving the plant long nights (darkness from 5 p.m. until 8 a.m.).

Mid-November. Color should be showing in the bracts.

Early December. Bract color should be almost complete; plant can be brought into ordinary light.

During the "bloom" forcing period, keep the temperature between 60 and 70° F. The plant should receive all possible sunlight during the day. Reduce fertilizer applications, since the plant will be making less growth while in the house. If possible, avoid spraying the plant with chemicals after the bracts begin to develop color.

Keeping a poinsettia from one year to the next is a lot of trouble, but you can do so if you are interested and will take the time.