Poinsettias: A New Twist on an Old Favorite
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Shortly after the end of the last ice age about 12,000 years ago, humans started to settle down and grow their own food. Thus began a process we call “artificial selection,” where humans choose traits of an organism (in this case a plant) that they find desirable, and select for them. The process of artificial selection is constantly being applied to all of our domesticated plants and animals, and common holiday plants, like the poinsettia are no exception. I must admit that I have a love/hate relationship with this plant. There is no debate as to the beauty of it; the colors come in an almost endless variety. The plant as a whole, however, can be quite weak if not given the proper care. There are certain “rules” one must follow to keep them looking their best throughout the holiday season.

The stems are extremely brittle, so if you brush up against the plant, or cram it into a full trunk on the way home, you may end up with a very lopsided plant. Watering is something to be careful with as well. Too dry and its leaves will quickly wither and drop starting from the bottom. A few dry spells and you have nothing but the stems and the flowers (actually colored leaves) at the top. Drying in the winter happens easily as we heat our houses. Moisture levels are at their lowest at this time of year, so check your plants at least twice a week and keep them away from heater ducts and wood stoves.

On the flip side, too wet conditions can cause plants to develop a fungus that will kill off entire portions of the plant, leaving a blackened, rotten, leafless stem. Overwatering can be easy to do if the plant is left in its
There is no way for water to escape, so the plant sits in a pool of water. It is best to keep the soil moist, but not wet. Water when the pot feels light, but before the leaves start to wilt. Be careful when watering, as any drops that are left on the leaves may cause unsightly spots. Instead, just water the soil surface or fill the saucer underneath the plant and let the soil wick up the water.

It has been said that “variety is the spice of life,” and the poinsettia is the epitome of this phrase. There are so many colors, combinations of colors, or styles of leaves. A cultivar called “Winter Rose” has the leaves naturally curled in such a way that they really do look like roses. My favorites are rare color varieties of the traditional styled leaves. I used to sell an orange variety that was extremely rare and would sell out almost instantly. The only downside was you needed to see it next to a red one to realize it was orange! A few years ago, I found a yellow poinsettia in one of the big box stores. It was simply beautiful in front of our white fireplace, but unfortunately, I have not found one since. There is an extremely attractive variety called “Jingle Bells” that looks like the red leaves were splattered with white paint, as well as bicolored pink and white leaves. One newest cultivar has a bright edge around an otherwise solid colored leaf. If all that was not enough, there are even plants that are sprayed with a special colored paint and/or glittered, if you desire.

Winter Rose poinsettia, image by Matthew Lisy

The good news for poinsettia enthusiasts is that breeders are selecting for sturdier plants, less leaf dropping when dry, and more tolerance/resistance to excess water and the associated fungal infections that follow. Although I have known people that try to keep their poinsettias going until the following December, it is a bit challenging. To get the upper leaves to turn colors, the plants need a certain period of absolute, uninterrupted darkness (newer varieties are more forgiving here too). I find it best to treat the plants like an annual in the garden outside – enjoy it for the season but compost it when the season is over.

So go ahead and bring an old favorite into your home this holiday season. Enjoy the hunt for some of the new colors or varieties out there. Try a different one each year to keep your holiday home familiar, but fresh. What variety will you find this year?

For your gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.