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Poinsettias - Truly the Most Beautiful Holiday Plants

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Over 35 million poinsettias are sold during the holiday season according to the USDA making them the number one potted flowering plant purchased in the United States. Red is the most popular color with pink and white poinsettias not far behind. For a number of years, these three colors were all that was available but over the last couple of decades varieties started showing up in salmons, maroon, yellows, creams, bi-colors and variegated. Plants are bred or treated to be multi-branching and more compact. Some are grown as small trees, or standards, while poinsettia hanging baskets are also an item in some markets.

Not only have poinsettias been showing up in new colors but the 'Winter Rose™' series was launched a few years ago first featuring red poinsettias with large rose-like, multi-layered blooms. Soon these ruffled novelty poinsettias were available in pink, white and marble (a lovely pink and white variegation). 'Winter Rose™' plants may be a bit tall and stiff but the blooms are absolutely lovely in holiday arrangements combined with evergreen sprigs and red candles.

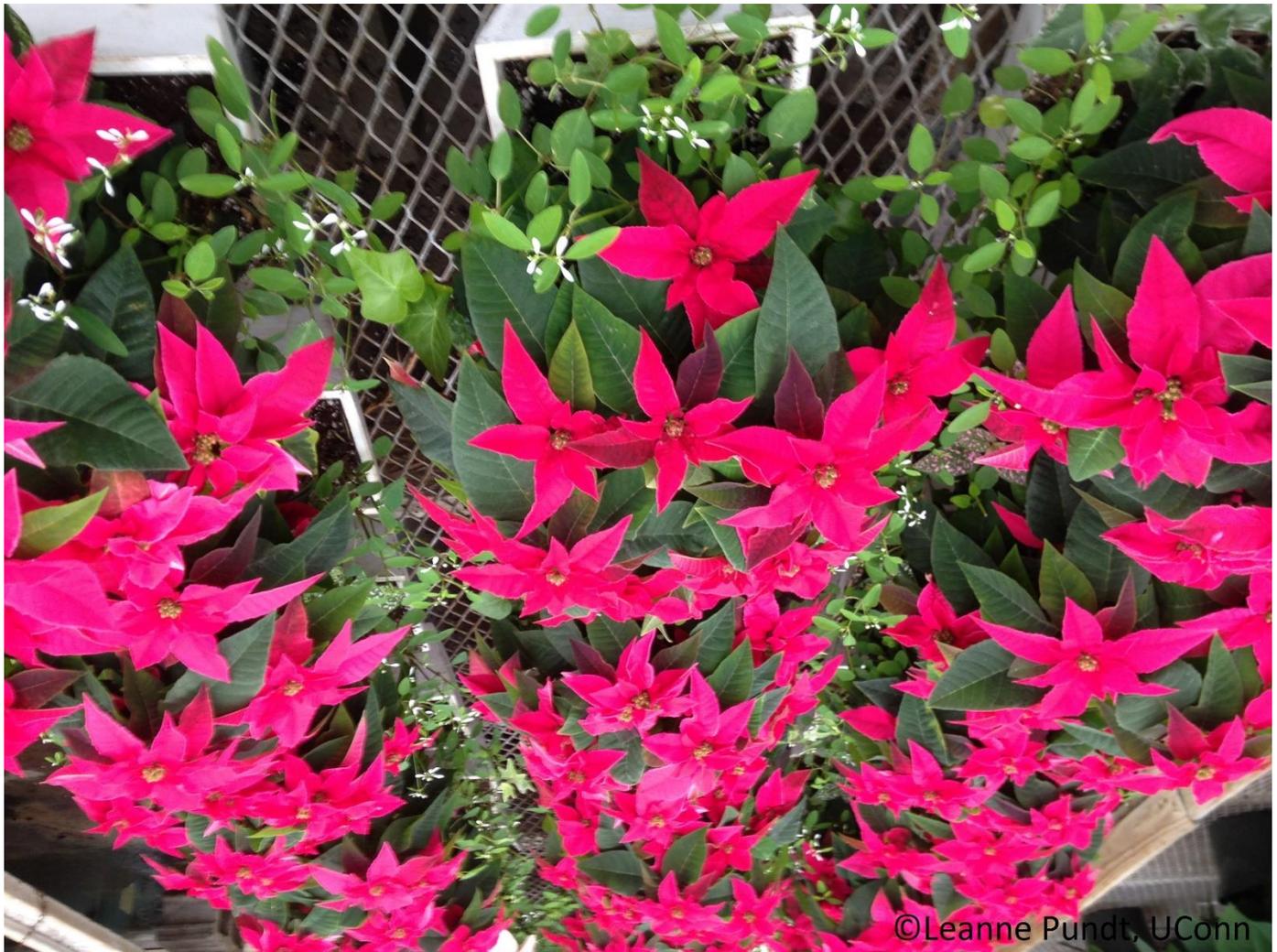
All the rage in Europe for some time now, 'Fantasy' poinsettias are becoming more popular in the U.S. You may have noticed sky blue, lavender, orange, turquoise or fuchsia poinsettias, some even with glitter, in various garden centers or florists. Most likely, you deduced that these are not naturally occurring colors in poinsettia plants. And, you would be correct as these colors are spray painted on white poinsettias. Sometimes a spray adhesive is applied after painting to capture the fine, colored glitter for that shimmering effect. If you do choose a painted poinsettia, keep in mind that the paint may be water soluble so when watering your plant, do not wet the leaves. Sometimes we are asked if the color would be retained the following year and no, it would not be. If plant requirements are met for the poinsettia to rebloom next holiday season, it would be white.



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Another newer development in poinsettias is the Princettia™. This poinsettia hybrid features smaller, more compact plants with more branching and lots of smaller, colored, bract clusters. Technically, the colored portion of the poinsettia that we find so attractive is not the flowers but a plant part called a bract. Bracts are modified leaves. The actual flowers are the yellow cluster of buds in the center of a whorl of bracts. When picking a poinsettia to bring home, select ones with the yellow buds not yet opened. According to UConn Extension Educator, Leanne Pundt,

Princettias seem to be getting more popular both as single plants and as components of dish gardens following through with the holiday decorating theme.



Regardless of what style of poinsettia you opt for, they are all synonymous with the holidays. Poinsettias are native to Mexico and plants bloom during December. Plants naturally grow along the western coast of Mexico and in deep canyons. They were used by the Aztecs as both medicinal and dye plants. The Latin name for poinsettia, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, means ‘most beautiful’ and among the euphorbia species that I am familiar with, I wholeheartedly agree. Legends say that this plant became a symbol for Christmas because a community of Franciscan priests settled in this area during the seventeenth century. They used this bright red, native plant that bloomed during the Advent season to decorate their Nativity Celebration. Soon this became a tradition throughout Mexico.

Poinsettias were brought to the United States by the U.S. ambassador to Mexico from 1825 to 1830, Joel Poinsett. He sent cuttings to his South Carolina greenhouse and introduced poinsettias to his friends. It was not until 1920, however, that the first poinsettia variety was developed that could be successfully grown as a houseplant. The credit for this development goes to Paul Ecke, Sr. who went on to develop dozens of new cultivars including shades of orange, dusty rose, pink, creamy white and yellow. Also, plants hybridized by the horticulturists at the Paul Ecke Ranch in California, were selected to be shorter, stockier and retain their bracts for longer periods of time under typical household conditions.

Once brought home, poinsettias are fairly easy to care for. Setting them in bright but indirect light is recommended but this time of year the sun is weak so even a sunny windowsill will be fine. The temperature they are kept at is more important. Ideal temperatures for poinsettias are between 60 to 70 degrees F. Avoid drafts and excessive heat so keep them from doors and leaky windows and also, from wood burning stoves and heaters.

Do not overwater poinsettias as this will encourage root rots. Often, they are given as gifts or brought home in pots wrapped in foil or set in colorful plastic sleeves. These would not have drainage holes and if plants are given too much water, the pots will be sitting in standing water. Usually it is best to remove these wrappings and place a saucer underneath the pot. Try to keep the potting mix moderately moist.

It is not necessary to fertilize your poinsettia if it is just to be kept around for the holidays. Those hoping to get the plant to rebloom next holiday season would wait until bracts fade and then cut back the plant to about 8 inches. Continue to water and begin monthly fertilizing and new growth should be seen by May. Plants can be grown throughout the summer with occasional pinching done to encourage branching. Transplant poinsettias into larger pots if necessary. Starting October 1st, keep your poinsettia in total darkness from about 5 pm to 7 am and do this for 10 weeks. The bracts should begin to color up again in late November and enjoy this beautiful poinsettia plant for another holiday season.

If you have questions about poinsettias or on other horticultural topics, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.ladybug.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.