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GARDEN NOTES

POINSETTIA - NURTURE IT OR THROW IT AWAY?

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Winter-10

Poinsettias are the plant we associate most with Christmas. It is the best selling potted plant in America.

Christmas is over. Now the dilemma begins. Do I try to nurse it throughout the year in hopes blooms next year, or do I just let it die and buy another one come December 2000?

The magnificent color of the poinsettia is actually the top leaves of the plant, which are also called bracts, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. Poinsettia flowers emerge as inconspicuous yellow blossoms in the center of the bracts. Poinsettia bracts are light sensitive, which means their coloring is in response to the light they receive during the day, or rather, the lack of light during the night. In their native country, Mexico, they begin their colorful show about Christmas time.

Poinsettias are named after Joel Roberts Poinsett who was the first ambassador from America to Mexico, Goodspeed explains. He was a great ambassador but is best remembered for bringing the poinsettia plant back to his home in South Carolina in 1828. He had a greenhouse there and began growing and giving the plant to friends and neighbors. The poinsettias became popular, and many people began seeking their beautiful color for the Christmas season. In 1906, a man named Albert Ecke started a small poinsettia growing operation in Los Angeles. He relocated his growing business in Encinitas, Calif., in 1923, where it stands today.

Poinsettias need a minimum of six hours of indirect light each day, he says. They enjoy the same room temperatures that we do—between 68 and 70 F. Water only after the soil becomes dry to a depth of one to three inches.

Keep poinsettias away from drafty locations, Goodspeed says. They hate cool temperatures, so avoid exposing them to temperatures below 50 F. Fertilize poinsettias once the small yellow/orange flower in the middle of the colorful bracts are through blooming. Apply a balanced, all purpose fertilizer, and only water when necessary.

With proper care, poinsettia bracts can be maintained until about March or even April. Once they begin to fall, cut the plant back, leaving about six buds, he says. For the first couple of weeks it will look like a stick. Water and fertilize it as before, and by May, it will start to leaf out again. To keep it small and compact, cut it back about mid-July and early September to stimulate

branching.

Beginning the first of October, put the plant in complete darkness as soon as the sun sets until it rises again, allowing a minimum of 14 hours of darkness, Goodspeed adds. A bag can be placed over the plant, or it can be set in a closet throughout the night. By the end of November, it will start to color and you will be able to enjoy its color for another season.

“Or, you can just put it in a bag right now and escort it to the nearest trash receptacle, he says. I actually prefer letting the plant die about mid-February, and not worrying about saving it for the coming year.”

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