

## Caring for Your Poinsettia

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**T**he colorful poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*), one of America's favorite holiday season plants, is native to southern Mexico and Central America, where it grows as a large shrub or small tree. Joel Roberts Poinsett, who was the first ambassador to Mexico from the United States, introduced the poinsettia to America in the 1820s. Poinsett, who had a lifelong interest in botany, found his first poinsettia in 1828 while exploring the Mexican countryside in search of new plant species.

The widespread belief that poinsettias are poisonous is a misconception. Extensive laboratory testing and university research have concluded that poinsettias are not poisonous. However, this does not imply that they are edible. Like other euphorbias, when their stems are cut or broken, poinsettias exude a milky latex sap that can cause a skin rash in some people. If you do not know whether or not you have an allergy to euphorbias, it may be a good idea to wear gloves when pruning your poinsettia.

Another misconception is that the brightly colored portion of the plant is the flower. Actually, these are bracts, which color at the top of the stem when the plant is in bloom. The flower is the little cluster of bright yellow blooms in the center of the bracts.

Many poinsettias are needlessly thrown away in January. Your poinsettia can give you several years of pleasure if cared for properly. Following are several steps on how to care for your poinsettia.

- Care of your poinsettia begins at the point of purchase. Have the store wrap your plant carefully because exposure to low temperatures, even for a few minutes, can damage the bracts and leaves. Protect it even in the brief period while transporting it between the store and your automobile.
- When you get home, unwrap your poinsettia carefully and place it in a sunny window. Keep the plant from touching cold windows.
- Keep poinsettias away from warm or cold drafts from heaters, air registers or open doors and windows.
- Ideally, poinsettias require daytime temperatures of 60 to 70°F and nighttime temperatures around 55°F. High temperatures will shorten the plant's life. Move the plant to a cooler room at night, if possible.
- If your poinsettia came in a decorative foil wrap, be sure to punch holes in the foil to provide drainage. Check the soil each day. Water only when soil is dry. Allow water to drain into a saucer placed beneath the plant container. Be sure to discard excess water. Overwatering kills many poinsettias.



- Fertilize the poinsettia if you keep it past the holiday season. Apply a houseplant fertilizer once a month.
- After your poinsettia finishes blooming, gradually reduce watering until the plant sheds all its bracts. Give the plant a period of cool dormancy in a protected spot in a garage or unheated greenhouse. In early spring, repot in fresh potting soil and begin to increase water and fertilizer again. After the plant resumes active growth, prune to the best 3–5 branches and cut those back by a third. This feeding and pruning regimen will result in a full plant with large blooms the following winter. Prune for shape as needed but do not prune after September 1 if you want to force growth and coloring for a holiday display.
- Poinsettias are photosensitive plants. In nature, they start changing color when the nights become longer than the days. In late September or early October, begin forcing your poinsettia to rebloom by placing it in complete darkness for 12–14 hours each night for 10 weeks. A closet, box, cupboard or other completely dark space can be used. During the day, place the plant in a bright sunny spot. Your poinsettia should begin to show color soon after this treatment.



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