REEMS CREEK NURSERY

Poinsettias

A Garden Guide



Poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) are stunning and festive houseplants. As tender perennials, under the proper conditions, they can last for years. They are native to the rocky slopes in the dry tropical regions of southern Mexico and into Central America. They have been used for centuries by indigenous peoples. The Aztecs called this prized plant "Cuetlaxochitl," they used the bracts to dye clothing and used the milky white sap to make herbal medicines. The Mayans also valued this plant for aesthetic and medicinal purposes, and planted them in their gardens. By the 17th century, Francisican priests were decorating their churches at Christmas with poinsettias - a New World take on the traditional holiday evergreens. Now they are a popular and joyous part of the holiday season, and come in a variety of colors and patterns. The colorful bracts are modified leaves, the actual flowers are in the tiny yellow centers called cyathia. Unfortunately, wild poinsettia populations are declining due to habitat loss.

Safety: While they are definitely NOT to be eaten, and the milky white sap contains a mild latex; the University of Minnesota states that "poinsettias are not poisonous." The ASPCA says, "While they're certainly not good for pets to ingest, they're also not as dangerous as many people believe... Poinsettias may be the most misrepresented plant when it comes to toxicity." The National Poison Control Center rates poinsettias as "Irritating but Not Fatal." Eating this plant can cause digestive upset. Keep out of reach of curious children and pets; some gardeners prefer to wear gloves when dealing with these plants.

General Care: Poinsettias prefer bright indirect light, and temperatures between 65-70°F during the day, and slightly cooler at night, but no cooler than 55°F. They do not like drafts, or to be touching windows. Like other members of the Euphorbia genus, they prefer to be on the drier side. If keeping a dish under the plants, be sure to empty it after watering. They do not like "wet feet." Sudden temperature changes can cause them to go into shock and drop all foliage. They can also drop in response to overwatering (which you can detect by the heavy pot) or extreme underwatering (a very light pot).

Calendar: If you are interested in experimenting with keeping your Poinsettias year round, there are some key things to do and be aware of:



- February and March: Your poinsettias will naturally drop old leaves and replace them with new green leaves. These leaves will not have the bright winter colors. Check for pests, such as whitefly, and manage with insecticidal soaps and/or horticultural oils.

- April: start to step back watering. Do not allow your plant to get so dry that the stems shrivel. During this dry period, store it in a cool (~60F) location.

- Mid May: cut the stems to ~4-5" above the soil. You can repot it now to a larger pot. Be sure to plant it in fresh potting soil. You can add in additional perlite for drainage if the soil seems like it might hold too much water. Water thoroughly once replanted. Once new growth appears, you can start fertilizing with a 20-10-20 or 15-5-15 fertilizer. Calmag may also be helpful.

- June: if you like, you can move the plant outdoors to a lightly shaded location.

- Early July: pinch each stem, to promote a bushy form.

- Late August: pinch each stem again, and bring plants inside if you took them outside. They require about 10 weeks of days with daylight limited to 12 hours or less.

- Early October: keep the plant in **COMPLETE DARKNESS** for 16 hours every night until Thanksgiving, but give it bright light during the daytime. Covering the plant with a large box works. Continue to fertilize. Rotate daily for even growth.

If everything works according to plan, your plant will reward you with bright, colorful bracts just in time for the holidays!

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