



POINSETTIAS: *Stars of the Season*

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Looking through the pages of this issue, you may be inspired to try a star theme for your holiday decorating this year. Surprisingly, in addition to using starfish as ornaments and other embellishments, you can expand your repertoire of decorative home accents simply by including poinsettias, which are also known as Christmas stars.

A closer look at the poinsettia reveals why this nickname was bestowed upon this beautiful botanical. First, the traditional coloration of these festive florals, with their vibrant red blooms set against verdant green leaves, makes them an ideal symbol of the season. Nowadays, however, the color options are almost limitless, as breeding and hybridization has yielded over



IN THE GARDEN

100 varieties of poinsettias in colors such as creamy white, soft yellow, delicate peach, pastel blue and even multi-colored blooms. Second, as you look at the yellow flower, or *cyathia*, and the modified leaves that surround it, which are known as bracts, a familiar five-pointed shape will become apparent.

Native to Central America, poinsettias have an interesting history. From the 14th through the 16th centuries, the Aztec people used the plant's bracts to make a reddish-purple dye for clothing and cosmetics, and its milky white sap as a medicine for treating fevers. The poinsettia's botanical name was given to it in the early 1800s by German botanist and plant taxonomist Carl Willdenow. The story has it that he was so dazzled by the color of the plant which grew in a crack in his greenhouse that he was inspired to call it *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, the latter part of which means "very beautiful."

The plant's common name honors the first U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett, a botany enthusiast who came across the beautiful red shrub in the late 1820s while exploring that nation's countryside. He sent samples of the plant to the United States, where it became widely known as the "poinsettia" by 1836. In further recognition of his achievement, the date of his death, December 12, has been designated as National Poinsettia Day. This occasion also recognizes the contributions of Paul Ecke, Jr., known as the father of the poinsettia industry. In addition to his discovery of a technique that causes seedlings to branch, which was a closely held secret until the 1990s, his tireless efforts to promote the plant's association with the holidays helped the commercial growth of this plant to flourish. Today, this connection continues to thrive since, as the University of Illinois Extension reports, poinsettias are the most popular Christmas plant, with about \$60 million worth of these fabulous florals sold in the six-week period leading up to that holiday. Additionally, it is the best-selling potted plant in the U.S. and Canada, contributing over \$250 million to the U.S. economy at the retail level.

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IN THE GARDEN

While poinsettias are known for their exotic beauty, they have also incorrectly acquired a reputation as being a poisonous plant. Despite rumors to the contrary, poinsettias pose little to any risk for humans: studies by The Ohio State University in connection with the Society of American Florists showed that a 50-lb. child would have to consume more than 500 leaves to have any harmful effect. Another definitive finding is that some people, particularly those who are sensitive to latex, may have mild allergic reactions such as skin irritation or a rash if they come into contact with the sap. All experts are in agreement, however, that these plants must be kept out of the reach of your pets, especially if you have puppies or kittens, to ensure their safety and health.

When selecting a poinsettia, seek out a stocky plant with dense, deep green foliage and firm, colorful bracts with little to no pollen visible in the center. After arriving home, be sure to remove the shiny foil wrapper that may be tucked around the pot before watering, as this liner prevents the water from draining out, leaving the soil saturated and the roots soggy. Place your poinsettia in a room with bright, natural light, preferably near a window. Since extreme temperatures are harmful, keep the poinsettia away from direct heat, exterior doors and drafty areas. To ensure a long and healthy life for your plant, check it daily by feeling the surface of the soil since it is crucial that your poinsettia does not get dry enough to wilt. If the soil feels wet to the touch, it does not need water. If it's dry, which will typically happen every 3 to 5 days, the best method for watering is to move it, pot and all, to the sink and soak it thoroughly. Since it's not advisable to have it sit in a water-filled saucer, leave it there until no more water drains from it, which should take about an hour, then return it to its spot. It is recommended to fertilize your plant every three to four weeks. After the holidays, trim the plant back about 8 to 10 inches when the blooms begin to wilt and fade. As it grows, you may want to transplant it into a larger pot or directly into the ground, resulting in a plant you can enjoy for many more holidays to come.

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