

New Twists on Traditional Christmas Flower
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December 2015

Poinsettias continue to be the favored flowering holiday plant this time of the year. While red is still the most popular and traditional color; pinks, whites, variegated, salmon, yellow and even orange varieties abound. Plant sizes vary from standard four- to six-inch pots, to miniatures to tree forms and even hanging baskets. With so many shapes, sizes, and colors of poinsettias available, there really is one to fit any indoor setting. I'm a big advocate of supporting our local green industry so I encourage you to purchase your holiday plants from our many family-owned and operated garden centers and nurseries in Tennessee.

There are over 110 varieties of poinsettia varieties on the market that can be grown for retail sales. I contacted Stanley's Greenhouses and Plant Farm in south Knoxville who always grow some of the most beautiful and high quality poinsettias you can find, to see what new and unique selections they are offering this year. They start with unrooted cuttings in June. It takes six good months of growing with tender loving care to produce the beautiful holiday flowers they sell. Some of the new and unique selections they have grown this year include: 'Orange Spice', a really true orange poinsettia great for any Tennessee Volunteer fan; 'Jingle Bell Rock' has a dramatic appearance with a bright red background color and a blaze of white along the leaf midvein; I like 'Shimmer Surprise' which is a real novelty that looks as though Mother Nature splashed her brush of white paint on its gorgeous red foliage; 'Strawberries 'n Cream' has distinct irregular cream and dark pink colored bracts; 'Red Winter Rose' has globe-shaped bracts like you've never seen on a poinsettia before; 'Ice Punch' is an exciting new variety that is cranberry red with a frosty white pattern; 'Tapestry' has bright red bracts on a backdrop of foliage featuring a mosaic pattern of green, cream, burgundy and red; 'Early Monet' has beautiful coral bracts which are liberally spotted with pink and finally, the 'Princettia' series which has smaller bracts but unique colors of pinks and white and can last all the way through Valentine's Day. You'll find that many local garden centers will feature many of these selections in tree forms and hanging baskets. Poinsettias are generally priced according to the number of blooms. The more blooms, the more expensive the plant. According to the University of Illinois, 80% of poinsettias are purchased by women, and 75% of Americans prefer red poinsettias to white.

Regardless of the size or variety, poinsettias like bright light and even moisture. They cannot tolerate going too dry. If a poinsettia wilts, it will proceed to lose most of its leaves. With plenty of light and even moisture they can keep their colored bracts for many months.

Flowers or Foliage?

The poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherima*) does not have showy flowers. Rather, the bracts, modified leaves, create the splash of color during the holiday season while the true flowers are small and insignificant. The colorful bracts of poinsettias are a response to day length, the hours of daily sunlight. Starting around September in Tennessee, day length become short enough to trigger the bracts to become colorful by the holiday season.

Are Poinsettias Poisonous?

Contrary to popular belief, poinsettias are not poisonous. However, several plants in the same family as poinsettia are poisonous. Ohio State University conducted research on the poinsettia plant effectively disproving the charge that the poinsettia is harmful to human and animal health. Of course, the poinsettia, like all ornamental plants, is not intended for human and animal consumption.

A Bit of History.

The first known use of poinsettias for holiday celebrations occurred in the 17th Century, when a group of Franciscan priests settled in southern Mexico. Since the poinsettias bloom during the Christmas season, they began to utilize the plant in nativity processions. In the wild, the poinsettia can reach heights of 12 feet with leaves measuring six to eight inches across. It wasn't until 1825 that the plant became known to the United States. Joel Robert Poinsette, a botanist and the first U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, had some plants sent to his home in Greenville, South Carolina. He shared the plants with other plant enthusiasts and now December 12, National Poinsettia Day, recognizes Poinsette's contribution to the holiday season and greenhouse industry. In 1992, the poinsettia was included on the list of houseplants most helpful in removing pollutants from indoor air. So it appears they add more than just color to a home or office at Christmas. Poinsettias are the top selling potted flowering plants in the U.S. with more than 65 million being sold last year. They accounted for one-third of sales of all flowering potted plants. In economic terms, that's \$237 million out of a total of \$781 million in sales of all flowering potted plants! An even more amazing statistic when you consider that the vast percentage of poinsettias are sold within a six week period each year! (*Source: Growers Direct, 2015*)