



# Poinsettia Care

Dara Palmer, Assistant Montana Master Gardener Coordinator  
Toby Day, Horticulture Associate Specialist

The poinsettia, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, was first cultivated by the Aztecs in Mexico. The plant did not come to the United States until 1825, when botanist Joel R. Poinsett shipped plants to his home in South Carolina from Mexico. Diligent propagation and promotion have ensured the poinsettia is a mainstay of the holiday season.

## Selection

Poinsettias come in many colors: red, yellow, pink, white, bi-colored, and speckled. Choose plants with even, dark green foliage rather than pale green or yellow, as those are likely to have disease or nutrient deficiencies. The bracts (the showy, colored "leaves") should be well developed.

## Location and Temperature

Poinsettias will thrive in a bright location with at least six hours of daylight, such as a sunny window, but out of the way of drafts and variable air currents. To maintain bright red bracts, keep the room temperature 67-70 degrees F during the day and 60-62 degrees F at night, taking care to not let the temperature fall below 50 degrees F, as chilling injury may occur.

## Water and Fertilizer

Poinsettias require a moderately moist soil, not too wet or too dry. Check soil moisture daily and water when it feels dry. Water only until you begin to see moisture coming out drain holes in the bottom of the pot. If the pot is wrapped in cellophane, remove it. Root rot can occur if the plant sits in standing water, so drain off any excess. Poinsettias do not need fertilizer while they are in bloom. However, after the bloom period (usually 6-8 weeks) a complete fertilizer formulated for house plants can be added at the label rate to ensure dark green foliage and promote new growth. Repeat once more in another 6-8 weeks.

## After the Holidays

You can continue to care for poinsettias after they have bloomed and enjoy them as a foliage house plant. The bracts will eventually turn a muddy green color (around early May), at which point you should cut back the plant. Prune to create a full, rounded appearance, leaving 3-4 leaves on remaining stems. It won't look like much, bare branches with blunt, woody stems, but by the end of May, expect to see vigorous green growth. Continue to water regularly and keep in a sunny spot, fertilizing once a month. After a few months, replant in a larger pot, if necessary, using a well-drained potting soil for house plants.

## Re-flowering

In order to flower and develop colored bracts, poinsettias need 6-8 hours of bright sunlight a day, but more importantly, they need at least 14 hours of complete darkness each night beginning October 1. This can be done by moving plants to a dark room or placing a large box over them while maintaining nighttime temperatures of 60-70 degrees F. If the temperature is too high or low, the setting of flower buds may be delayed or halted. Likewise, any stray light (street lights, nightlights, lamps), could delay re-flowering process. This treatment should continue until color appears in the bracts, approximately 8-10 weeks.

## References

S. E. Newman and B. E. Edmunds, Colorado State University Extension; University of Minnesota Extension; Photo courtesy of: Paul Ecke Poinsettia Ranch, [www.ecke.com](http://www.ecke.com)



## Contact Us

### MSU Extension Horticulture

312 Leon Johnson Hall  
P.O. Box 173140  
Bozeman, MT 59717  
(406) 994-6523

[hort@montana.edu](mailto:hort@montana.edu)

*Montana State University, U.S.  
Department of Agriculture and  
Montana Counties cooperating.  
MSU Extension is an equal  
opportunity/affirmative action  
provider of educational out-  
reach.*

