

Poinsettia Fact Sheet

1. Q. Every year my family enjoys the beauty of poinsettias. What can we do to keep poinsettias in good condition for a longer time?

A. Check your poinsettia daily and follow these tips. Water your poinsettia frequently but don't drown it. Keep the plant out of drafts, hot or cold. Place the plant in good light inside the house. And finally, after blooming, discard or begin preparing the plant to bloom again next year.

Poinsettias are perhaps the most difficult flowering potted plants to rebloom indoors. Fortunately in some warmer areas, poinsettias can be planted directly out-of-doors in the spring after the danger of frost is past. If placed in a protected area where early fall frost won't harm it, they will make beautiful plants for the next holiday season.

Make sure that the outdoor poinsettia receives only natural sunlight. Any additional light from yard and street lights will inhibit blooming. Keep pinching out the tips of the new growth once a month so the plant will bush out. Do no pinching after August 15th. The plant should flower right on time if these procedures are followed.

2. Q: How do you get a poinsettia to bloom?

A: From the first of October until the colored bracts can be seen it should not receive any light at night. Cover the plant at dusk every evening with a light-proof bag and uncover about 8:00 AM in the morning. A closet may be ideal to put it in at night. Even a quick, short exposure to even dim light can prevent flowering.

3. Q: Will poinsettia plant in ground freeze?

A: Yes. If well mulched root system might make it with only moderate cold weather. Probably will not make it with severe cold.

4. Q: Is a poinsettia poisonous?

A: According to the Parkland Poison Control Information Center, the average person would have to eat 500 to 700 poinsettia leaves before they would have a serious problem. Of course, some people are more sensitive than others. So, one leaf may cause some digestive problems to a very sensitive person. Poinsettias are a member of the euphorbia family and white, milky latex sap may cause eye and skin irritations in people sensitive to the sap. These plants are best classified as "possibly toxic" and not "poisonous".

5. Q: How do you keep a poinsettia?

A: Keep damp, not wet, in bright light. Keep it out of drafts and away from heating ducts.

6. Q. It seems I forget this every year; when should I start and how long should I cover my poinsettia to make it color by Christmas?

A. Hopefully, you kept your plant in a pot and mobile. If so, bring the plant indoors and set it near a sunny window where the temperature will remain between 65 to 70 degrees F. Some folks may have decided to plant their poinsettia in the ground last spring. Now they have an earth-bound plant which will be more difficult to handle. Causing an earth-bound poinsettia to color at the right time is more difficult because of two factors. First of all, poinsettias are cold-sensitive and may freeze if left unprotected until the expected Christmas color period occurs. Secondly, poinsettias must be exposed to a short day (9 hours) lighting period to insure Christmas color. If plants do not receive this altered lighting pattern they will initiate color after Christmas rather than during the holiday season. Also the dark period of each long night (15 hours) must be uninterrupted by ANY light. This means that an earth-bound plant would have to be daily covered to thoroughly exclude light.

To have the plant in full bloom by Christmas, keep it in complete darkness from 5 p.m. to 8 a.m. starting the first week in October and continuing until Thanksgiving. Flowering will be delayed if the plant receives ANY supplemental lighting during this period. The poinsettia will set flower buds only after being exposed to the short day (10 hours of light or less) for about 10 weeks.

7. Q. I received so many beautiful poinsettias for Christmas, I just hate to throw them away and buy some more next year. How can I save these sentimental plants? Will they bloom again next Christmas?

A. The best policy for handling poinsettias is to use them, then lose them! However, some folks are sentimental or maybe skeptical that people won't love them enough to give replacement plants next year. Regardless, the poinsettia plant you received for Christmas can be brought into color next year. The results usually aren't worth the effort since the flowers (colored bracts) you produce won't be of the same quality as the ones you had on the plants last year.

After the most of the poinsettia leaves fall off, reduce the watering and store the dormant plant in a cool, well ventilated place at 60 degrees F. or above (the garage is an excellent place for these less than attractive plants).

In March prune back the stems to about 6 inches above the ground and re-pot the plant into a container which is one to two inches larger in diameter than the original pot. A good potting mix, one of the commercially prepared potting mixes, should be used.

Water the plant thoroughly and place it in a sunny window, keeping it at 70 to 75 degrees F. When new growth begins, the poinsettia should be fertilized every two weeks with a water soluble, complete fertilizer. The rate recommended for pot plants on the label of the fertilizer container should be used.

Once the danger of frost is past, the plant can be moved outdoors where it received moderate shade in mid-afternoon. As growth develops, the top can be cut or pinched back leaving three or four leaves on each shoot. This procedure should be repeated each time the plant sends out new shoots until mid-August. Then bring the plant indoors and set it near a sunny window where the temperature will remain between 65 to 70 degrees F.

DON'T PLANT THE POINSETTIA IN THE GROUND. If you do you will have an earth-bound plant which will be more difficult to color at the right time. To have the plant in full bloom by Christmas, you must keep it in complete darkness from 5 p.m. to 8 a.m. starting the first week in October and continuing until Thanksgiving. Flowering will be delayed if the plant receives any supplemental lighting during this period. The poinsettia will set flower buds only after being exposed to the short day (10 hours of light or less) for about 10 weeks. In the daytime the plant must be in a sunny location for maximum growth and development of bracts and flowers. Continue to apply water soluble fertilizer until mid-December, then reduce applications to one-half the normal amount.