

Poinsettias provide vibrant colors

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office

Poinsettias have been admired for centuries for their colorful red bracts in the late fall.

The Aztecs cultivated the plant in an area near present-day Taxco before Christianity came to the Western Hemisphere.

Among its admirers is the last Aztec king, Montezuma, who reportedly had poinsettias brought into what now is Mexico City by caravan because they could not be grown in the high altitude.

It wasn't until the 17th century that the poinsettia was used in Christmas celebrations.

A group of Franciscan priests near Taxco began using the flower in nativity processions because of the brilliant red color and holiday blooming time.

Legend Of A Girl

Poinsettias were first brought to the United States in 1825 by Robert Poinsett, the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico and an avid botanist. He had several sent to his home in Greenville, S.C., and proceeded to distribute them to botanical gardens and friends. Since then, the poinsettia has become the No. 1 floriculture crop in the United States, even though it is only grown for the holiday season of sales.

Beyond the history of this

plant, there's a touching Mexican legend that tells of a poor Mexican girl, Pepita, who had no gift to present the Christ child at Christmas Eve services. As Pepita walked to the chapel with her cousin Pedro, her heart was filled with sadness. Pedro tried to console her by telling her that even the most humble gift would be acceptable. Not knowing what to do, Pepita knelt by the roadside and gathered a handful of common weeds, fashioning them into a small bouquet.

Pepita fought back a tear as she entered the small village chapel. As she approached the altar, she felt her spirit lift as she knelt to lay the bouquet at the foot of the nativity scene. Suddenly, the bouquet of weeds burst into blooms of brilliant red, and all who saw them were certain that they had witnessed a Christmas miracle right before their eyes. From that day on, the bright red flowers were known as the Flores de Noche Buena or Flowers of the Holy Night, for they bloomed each year during the Christmas season.

That's the legend, but science has proved poinsettias to be photoperiodic, which means that it blooms in response to short-day lengths or to be more accurate, long nights. During winter, as days get shorter and nights grow longer, the poinsettias naturally go into bloom in the northern hemisphere.

The colorful "flowers" that we see are really bracts, specialized leaves that attract insects to pollinate the inconspicuous flowers. Bracts last much longer than traditional flower petals, allowing us to enjoy the color for extended periods. The actual poinsettia flowers are the small yellow centers of the bloom called cyathia.

Know What To Look For

When selecting a poinsettia, look for a plant with fresh, brightly colored bracts. Be sure to also inspect the condition of the small flowers. If most or all of the yellow centers are falling off, the plant is past its prime. Also, drying and curling lower leaves are a sign of water stress. Plants should have strong branches. Poinsettias are delicate, and stem breakage is common, especially in multibranched, low-spreading plants.

Once you pick that perfect poinsettia, the key to longevity is bright light, moderate temperatures and proper watering. Poinsettias will do best near a bright sunny window that receives at least six hours of light. Low light levels will cause bracts to fade along with premature dropping of cyathia and leaves. Temperatures around 70 degrees are ideal; high temperatures will shorten the life of the plant. Also, try to avoid placing the plant in a draft from open windows or heater vents.



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Watering is another concern for consumers. First of all, if the plant comes in a foil or plastic pot cover, make sure you have drainage holes in the bottom. If you don't, the plant's root system will likely suffer from high soil moisture levels which can result in root rots.

As with its succulent relatives, it is best to let the soil moderately dry out before watering. Be careful not to let the plant dry out to the point that it wilts. The plant will recover somewhat, but the stress will usually result in leaf drop or curling leaves, leaf burn and shortened plant life.

The best way to check for water is to feel the soil. If it is dry to the touch about an inch down, it needs water. Checking the weight of the pot will also give you an indication to dryness. Note the weight of the pot when it is fully watered. As the soil dries, it will become very light. If the peat-based soil becomes extremely dry, it may take two or three waterings to completely rehydrate the soil. Also avoid using fertilizer when watering during flowering.

The poinsettia is an easy plant to grow. It's brilliant red bracts will fill your home with color and stories.

