

# Poinsettias

Poinsettias are the most popular plant grown during the holiday season. In fact, they are the bestselling potted plant in the United States and Canada.

There are more than 100 varieties of Poinsettias. In addition to the traditional red, plants are available in a wide variety of colors including pink, white, yellow, purple, and salmon.

## Are Poinsettias toxic?

Contrary to popular belief, **Poinsettias are not poisonous**. The misconception began in 1919 when a child allegedly died after eating a leaf. This was never proven and was later determined to be hearsay, but the story has persisted.

A study at Ohio State University showed that a 50-pound child would have to eat more than 1¼ pounds of poinsettia leaves, 500 to 600 leaves, to have any harmful effects.

Poinsettias may ooze a milky sap and some people that have latex allergies may have a reaction to it. This may also cause mild irritation and nausea in pets, so keep pets away.

## Selection

Poinsettia displays can last for several weeks with proper care. Choose plants that have little or no pollen showing in their greenish-yellow inner flowers for long lasting plants. Poinsettias will drop their bracts and leaves once their flowers have shed all their pollen.

Keep it wrapped during transport, particularly if it is cold outside. Exposure to cold temperatures can damage the plant. If properly cared for, poinsettias can retain their color for several months.



The colored parts or “flowers” of poinsettias are actually modified leaves called bracts. The greenish-yellow flowers, cyathia, are in the center of the bracts.

## Care: Sun, Water and Temperature

Keep plants in indirect sunlight for 6 hours and make sure they are not touching windows. Poinsettias should have daytime temperatures ranging from 60°F to 70°F and nighttime temperatures around 55°F. If needed, move the plant into a cooler room during the night.

Water when the soil is dry. Poinsettias often come wrapped in foil and plastic, poke holes in the bottom so water can drain out. Allowing plants to stay waterlogged can lead to root rot and premature death. It is not necessary to fertilize Poinsettias while they are in bloom.

## After the Holidays

While most people dispose of their Poinsettias after they finish blooming, it is possible to get it to bloom again next year.

Poinsettias will drop their bracts and leaves once their flowers have shed their pollen. Once half of the leaves and bracts have been dropped by the plant, decrease watering until the soil is completely dry. This will cause the plant to go dormant. While the plant is dormant store it in a cool, dark location and only water enough to prevent the stems from shriveling.



Around May 1 new growth will begin. Once this happens, cut the plant to within 4 to 6 inches of the soil to encourage new growth. Now is the time to repot the plant if wanted. Place the plant in a sunny window and treat it like any other house plant, watering when dry and occasionally apply a dilute fertilizer.

Once the danger of frost has passed and nighttime temperatures stay above 50°F, move the poinsettia outdoors, gradually exposing it to direct sun over the course of a week or two to allow it to adjust. Then, dig a hole to place the pot in an area that receives 6 to 8 hours of direct sunlight with some shade in the afternoon. Occasionally turn the pot to prevent the plant from rooting through the bottom holes of the pot. The plant does not need to be put in the ground, but it will need to be watered more frequently if not.

To keep the plant from getting too leggy, pinch off the shoot tips. Choose tips that have two or three fully expanded leaves below them. Do this every 3 or 4 weeks, until mid-August, to keep the plant compact. Regularly water the plant and fertilize every couple of weeks. When night temperatures get down to 55°F to 60°F, bring it back inside near a sunny window.

College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences | University of Illinois, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Local Extension Councils Cooperating. University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment. ©2020 University of Illinois Board of Trustees. For permission to reprint, revise, or otherwise use, contact [extension@illinois.edu](mailto:extension@illinois.edu).

To get plants to flower for Christmas, they need to be kept in the dark 5pm-8am October through the mid-December.

### Getting Poinsettias to Flower

Poinsettias are short-day plants, meaning they grow vegetatively during times where there are long days and will produce flowers when exposed to short days, or more specifically long nights.

The red leaves of the bracts will develop good color, usually in the beginning or middle of December. Place the plant in a dark enclosed space such as a closet or cover it with a box at night. Do this until the bracts are almost fully expanded. Keep daytime temperatures between 60°F and 70°F. Nighttime temperatures above 70°F to 75°F may delay or prevent flowering.

#### AUTHOR

Ken Johnson, Illinois Extension Horticulture Educator  
[kjohnso@illinois.edu](mailto:kjohnso@illinois.edu) | (217) 243-7424

#### MORE INFORMATION



[go.illinois.edu/Poinsettia](https://go.illinois.edu/Poinsettia)



**Illinois Extension**  
 UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN