

## *The Poinsettia*

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There is probably no other flowering plant that has come to symbolize a holiday better than the poinsettia. Decked out in the Christmas colors of red and green, it is a perfect choice to accent a holiday décor. But what do you really know about this plant? And do you really think you want to keep it on for reblooming next year? Known botanically as *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, the plant we call poinsettia is a woody shrub or small tree in its native habitat of Mexico and Guatemala, where it can reach a height of 13 feet. It is named for the first United States Minister to Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett, who is credited with the introduction of the plant in 1825.

The plant part that we think of as the flower petals is actually the colored bracts or leaves of the plant and can occur in orange, pale green, cream, pink, white or marbled, besides the flaming red we most associate with the plant. The actual flowers of the poinsettia are unassuming. They are grouped within small yellow structures found in the center of each leaf bunch, and are called cyathia

The colorful bracts are created through a phenomenon known as photoperiodism, the same process that was described last month in the article about bringing chrysanthemums into bloom. Poinsettias, short day/long night plants, require darkness for the bracts to change color. At the same time, the plants require abundant light during the day for the brightest color.

The plant requires a daily period of uninterrupted long, dark nights followed by bright sunny days for around two months in autumn in order to encourage it to develop colored bracts. Any incidental light during these nights (from a nearby television set, from under a door frame, even from passing cars or street lights) hampers bract production. Commercial production of poinsettia has been done by placing them inside a greenhouse and covering them completely to imitate the natural biological process.