

More about poinsettias

CHANCES ARE JUST ABOUT EVERYONE has at least one in their home. I'm talking about poinsettias. Literally millions of these plants are sold at this time of year — in a matter of weeks. Their myriad colours, sizes and shapes have made them *the* favourite Christmas flower in most homes. But how much do you know about your poinsettia? Where do they come from? Are they really poisonous? Can you keep them for next year? For more than you really needed to know about poinsettias, read on ...

Poinsettias are native to Mexico, where they grow wild. While it is known to botanists as *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, the plant gets its popular name from one Joel Robert Poinsett, an amateur botanist and the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico. In 1825 Poinsett brought some cuttings to his plantation in Greenwood, South Carolina, and the rest, as they say, is history.

So much for fact. The Christmas connection of the poinsettia dates back to a Christmas Eve centuries ago in Mexico, when a little girl named Pepita had no gift to present to the Christ child. On her way to the church she gathered up weeds along the road. Then, according to legend, a miracle unfolded. As she approached the altar, the weeds bloomed into vibrant flowers — *Flores de Noche Buena*, or Flowers of the Holy Night. The Aztecs called the poinsettia Cuetlaxochitl — and you thought poinsettia was hard to pronounce!. They made a reddish purple dye from the bracts. In Chile and Peru, the poinsettia is known as the Crown of the Andes and sometimes as the Flame Leaf Flower. In nature, they're a perennial flowering shrub that can grow up to ten feet in height.

Today, poinsettias range in colour from white to pink to traditional red, with shades of peach and yellow in between, with more than 100 varieties available. Newer varieties boast marbled, flecked, and even wrinkled bracts (the coloured portion of the plant).

The belief that poinsettias are poisonous, is simply an urban myth, according to CBC radio's gardening guru Ed Lawrence, and other plant experts, although it might give you an upset stomach if you were foolish enough to eat a plateful! For good measure, researchers at Ohio State University have proved the poinsettia to be non-toxic to both humans and pets. However, keeping the plant out of reach of pets, especially cats, is a good idea, to avoid stomach upset from the fibrous tissues.

When selecting poinsettias, look for plants with thoroughly coloured and expanded bracts, plentiful green foliage, strong stems, and no signs of wilting. Care and handling is easy. Poinsettias like indirect sunlight, room temperatures, and light to moderate soil moisture. Over-watering and excessive temperatures are the most common causes of any problems. Avoid cold drafts, excessive heat and soggy soil. With a little care, your poinsettias last through Christmas and beyond. And come Spring you can move them outside to grow them on for next year.... but that's a story for another day.