

The Poinsettia

by Candace Mullen, Bell County Master Gardener

By now, I am sure that all of us are thinking of Christmas and the holiday season sneaking up on us. Some of the decorations are already up around town and perhaps the day after Thanksgiving is the traditional day for you to decorate your own house. One of the traditional holiday decorating plants is the poinsettia. Most of us are familiar with their colorful leaves and abundance during this season.

The poinsettia has a long and colorful history. During the 14th-16th centuries the sap was used to control fevers, and the bracts (modified leaves) were used to make a reddish dye by the Aztecs. They called the plant "Cuetlaxochitl" and Montezuma, the last of the Aztec kings, would have the plants brought into the area now known as Mexico City by caravans because the poinsettia could not be grown in the high altitude. Much like the semi trucks of today bringing loads of them everywhere across the US! Chile and Peru call the poinsettia "Crown of the Andes".

Joel Roberts Poinsett was the first US Ambassador to Mexico and was appointed by Andrew Jackson in the 1820's. Poinsett had a great interest in botany, and while in Mexico he introduced the American elm to that country. He also wandered the Mexican countryside looking for new plant species. In 1828 he found a beautiful shrub with large red flowers growing next to a road. He took cuttings and brought them back to his South Carolina greenhouse. Although his political career was outstanding, he will always be remembered for introducing the poinsettia into the US.

The botanical name, *Euphorbia Pulcherrima*, was assigned to the poinsettia by German botanist Wilenow. It means "very beautiful". As the plant grew more popular, William Prescott, a historian and horticulturist, was asked to give *Euphorbia* a new name. He had just written a book, *The Conquest of Mexico*, in which he had detailed Joel Poinsett's discovery of the plant. So Prescott named the plant the poinsettia in honor of Poinsett's discovery.

In the early 1900's the Ecke family of Southern California started growing poinsettias outdoors for use as landscape plants and as a cut flower. Eventually they switched to greenhouses and today are recognized as the leading producer of poinsettias in the US.

Did you know that in nature the poinsettias are perennial flowering shrubs that can grow to ten feet tall? The showy colorful parts of the poinsettia that most people think are the flowers are actually colored bracts or modified leaves. The flowers or cyathia are actually in the center of the colorful bracts! Poinsettias have also been called the lobster flower, the flame leaf flower, and "Flower of the Holy Night". They are NOT poisonous. A fresh poinsettia, one that will last the longest during the season, has little or no yellow pollen showing on the flower cluster in the center.

December 12 is National Poinsettia Day and the plant represents over 85% of the potted plant sales during the holiday season! Ninety percent of all the flowering poinsettias in the world got their start at the Paul Ecke Ranch. There are over 100 varieties of poinsettias available! Sixty million pots of them were grown in 1997 and the number of blooms determines the cost of a poinsettia.

So how do we select a poinsettia to take home and enjoy during the season? Choose a plant with dark green foliage down to the soil line. Bracts should be completely colored. It should be 2 ½ times taller than the diameter of the container and the plant should look full, balanced, and attractive from all sides. Do NOT choose one with yellow, fallen leaves; one that is drooping or wilted; or one that has a great deal of yellow pollen. If you choose carefully you may enjoy the colorful display for weeks and perhaps months!

We traditionally look for the red or white or pink poinsettias, but the many new colors that have been developed are quite beautiful. They come in some unexpected colors - coral pink, plum, cream, marbled, two tones, speckled, or frosted! Here are a few to look for and admire: A speckled choice is "Jingle Bells"; marbled "Peterstar Marble"; edged in ivory "Strawberries 'n Cream"; or frosted "Monet". Or perhaps a rounded flower shape with bracts that curl under called "Winter

Rose" is more your choice. Or "Holly Point" which has variegated leaves. Or how about choosing a miniature variety known as "Mini Star"?

You also don't have to keep them in the pots either. Consider cutting the stem and using the florist's flower-picks so they can be placed in various decorations throughout the house. The Poinsettia is a wonderful, traditional way to brighten up the season and enjoy growing plants all winter. Have a wonderful holiday and enjoy your Poinsettia!