

## The tale of a Christmas plant: the lovely poinsettia

Ready or not, there's no denying the arrival of the holiday season once the poinsettia plant begins to make its appearance.

Whether it appears on the cover of a greeting card, in the windows of a local department store, or in a sea of red, pink and white flowers at a roadside nursery, the poinsettia is a sure sign that Christmas is just around the corner.

Although the poinsettia plant is not indigenous to the United States, Americans have come to associate its brilliant red, delicate pink and snowy white bracts with the Christmas season.

This exotic flowering plant, used to decorate homes and churches in Mexico during the Christmas season, was introduced to the United States in 1828 by Dr. Joel Robert Poinsett, at that time the U.S. ambassador to Mexico. Upon returning from his term of service in Mexico, he brought the plants home to his native South Carolina.

Poinsett propagated these plants, which he called "Painted Leaves," in his own greenhouses, and sent cuttings to botanists throughout the country. The plant was later named "Poinsettia" in his honor.

Poinsettias grow wild in Mexico and other areas of Central America, where they are shrubs that can reach 30 feet in height. Their brilliant flowers are most profuse in mid-December.

The Spanish name for poinsettias, *Flor de la Noche-buena* (flower of the holy night), derives from a Mexican legend which holds that the plant originated in a miracle.

As the legend has it, a poor peasant child, ashamed at having nothing to take to a service honoring the nativity of the Christ child, sadly picked a few weeds along the road to give as an offering at the church.

As he knelt at the altar with his humble gift, the child's earnest prayer and tears of reverence transformed the weeds into the flowering plant that has become as much a part of Christmas in this country as the evergreen tree.

Today, poinsettias are still imported from Mexico, though commercial growers in Hawaii and other warm-weather states add to the supply. A careful plant-lover, however, can keep the plant from one season to the next and enjoy its brilliant flowering year after year.

The poinsettia will flourish outdoors during the summer months in most parts of the country, becoming denser with foliage as the weeks of sunshine pass. Prior to putting the plant outdoors, it should be pruned to avoid its becoming too "leggy."

In order to have the plant bloom at Christmastime, poinsettias require equal amounts of daylight and darkness from the first week of October to the second week in November.

## 'Tis the season for decking the halls, trimming the tree

*O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum, How lovely are thy branches!*

—Louis Schneider

There's hardly a Christmas tradition that's more universally popular than trimming the tree. Be it live, fresh-cut or artificial, a brightly decorated tree sets the stage for a spirited holiday celebration.

Tree-trimming is a custom that was exported from Germany to England in the late 18th century. But it was not popularized until the 1840s when Prince Albert introduced it into the royal family, thereby setting a precedent which has since been followed by royalty and the common man alike.

It is said that Martin Luther

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