



Poinsettias:

*Brilliant symbols
of the holiday season*

Jan Arnold of Arnold's Greenhouses in Norval, checks this year's crop of poinsettias.

Story by Andrew Hind
Photos by Ted Brown

The poinsettia is a relatively new Christmas tradition. Whereas other holiday "greens"—such as holly, mistletoe and the Christmas tree—can trace their origins back as much as 2,000 years, this striking flower with its unmistakable blooms has only been linked to the yuletide season for a couple of hundred years or so.

And yet, today it is almost synonymous with the Christmas season.

Poinsettias originated in Mexico, where they have been a part of native legend for ages. The Central American Indians called it the "fire flower" because of its red blooms, and held it in great regard.

Early Spanish explorers were no less impressed when they arrived in the 1500s, and likewise created stories about the majestic plant. One bears a striking resemblance to the tale about the little drummer boy.

In it, a poor peasant girl finds to her dismay that she has no gift to leave at the altar of a Mexican cathedral in honor of the baby Jesus come Christmas Eve. She wept in despair. The sound of her crying attracted the attention of an angel, who directed the attendant girl to collect a bouquet of green plants that grew nearby to present to the Christ Child. Though her face was streaked with tears, she did as she was told and found to her surprise that when she placed the bouquet at the altar they instantly burst into a brilliant red bloom.

Consequently poinsettias have been, since the mid-1700s, a popular part of Mexican yuletide festivities.

Poinsettias would not be introduced to the United States and Canada for nearly another century, however. Joel Poinsett, the American ambassador to Mexico in the 1820s, gains the credit for popularizing the flower in North Americans.

During his time in Mexico, Poinsett fell in love with poinsettias and made sure to deck his residence out with them every holiday season. An avid botanist, Poinsett brought several cuttings with him when he returned home in 1825, and used these cuttings to grow a greenhouse full of poinsettias. He then began to give poinsettias as Christmas gifts, and it was not long before the popularity of this exotic flower had

spread across the country. Later, it became an international phenomenon.

The poinsettia's popularity continues to grow, and each year new cultivars appear on the market to excite the public.

"Fifty years ago, when my father started growing poinsettias, there were only three colours: red, white and burgundy," says Ian Arnold, of Arnold's Greenhouses in Norval.

"Today, there are dozens of colours and shades available. I grow 10 myself, including pink, orange, tri-colours, and various shades of white and red," says Arnold. "Poinsettias remain extremely popular; I sell 5,000 a year and I'm a relatively small greenhouse."

The poinsettia's popularity comes despite the fact it can be somewhat finicky. A tropical plant, it will drop leaves prematurely unless well-tended.

They require bright, natural light to thrive but should not be exposed to direct sunlight for more than a few hours at a time. Indirect, diffused light is best. By keeping the temperature around 18C you will ensure the flower retains its bloom longer. They should be placed well away from drafts or sources of heat, such as fireplaces, vents, or appliances.

"Poinsettias aren't creating flowers any more by the time you buy them. What you're trying to do is preserve the bloom, and for that cooler temperatures are best," explains Arnold.

But more important than light or temperature is ensuring poinsettias have the correct amount of water.

"Poinsettias like a fair amount of water so be sure to keep the soil moist, but not drenched. My favourite method is to simply soak a plant in a sink, allowing the excess water to drain. This should be done about once every 5-7 days, depending on the heat of the home," says Arnold. "It's also important that the pot has drainage holes. An abundance of water will cause the roots to rot, which results in the leaves yellowing and dropping. The number one mistake people make is over-watering. They kill the plant with kindness."

You'll also have better luck with poinsettias if you

start with a healthy specimen. Look for plants that are vibrant green; yellowing foliage is a sure sign of neglect, rotting roots or illness. Most people are unaware that the actual flowers of the plant are the yellow clusters (cyathias) in the center of the coloured foliage. Make sure the plant you choose still has cyathias because the coloured foliage will begin dropping soon after the bloom fades.

Nevertheless, in the right conditions, and if cared for properly, a poinsettia can retain its bloom into March or even April.

Despite the wide variety available, the nostalgic red remains the most popular, according to Arnold.

"Sixty per cent of sales are red poinsettias, and the closer we get to Christmas the more the red sell above specialty colours. That's because red poinsettias are traditional, and Christmas is all about tradition."

More than just a striking flower, over the past 200 years the poinsettia has become a symbol of the holiday season.



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