

Poinsettia--How to Select and Care for a Healthy Poinsettia

By Scott Oneto, Farm Advisor, University of California Cooperative Extension

The poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) is the most popular Christmas season plant. It was introduced into the United States in the late 1820's from its native Mexico by our first ambassador to that country, Joel Robert Poinsett. The plant was first known and probably is still best known for the bright red leaves or bracts that surround the inconspicuous, small, yellow, true flowers. Poinsettias may be purchased in colors ranging from white and cream through the various shades of pink and red. The following hints will help you choose a healthy poinsettia plant and how to care for it.



Choose a plant that hasn't shed pollen yet. To check, look for yellow pollen showing on the petal-like red and green bracts. Poinsettias showing pollen grains don't stay nice as long as those that haven't yet released pollen. Pay attention to the conditions where poinsettias are being sold. Poinsettias offered in stores during the holidays have been raised in a greenhouse at 60 to 70 degrees, in high humidity and maximum sunlight or growing lights. Store displays that mimic these growing conditions closely may contain healthier poinsettias than those for sale in hot, dry, and low-light conditions.

Choose poinsettias with deep green, not yellowish, leaves. Yellowing of foliage may indicate insufficient light, over-watering or lack of nitrogen. Look for brilliant red bracts. Once you choose a healthy plant you will need to do the following to keep it in good health:

- Put your poinsettia plant in a sunny window.
- Water regularly and thoroughly, but never allow a plant to stand in water.
- Fertilize once a week with a complete (20-20-20 or 20-5-10) fertilizer.
- Keep hot or cold drafts away from the plant. The leaves may wilt if the plant is too dry, too wet or exposed to a draft.

Yellowing of foliage may indicate insufficient light, over-watering or lack of nitrogen. Try improving the poinsettia's environment if any of these symptoms occur. After blooming, the mature bracts and leaves of your poinsettia will begin to fall naturally. Discontinue fertilizing and reduce watering. Cut the plant back to six inches and store in a cool dark area. Water only enough to prevent the stem from shriveling. In the spring, the plant can be set outdoors or maintained as a houseplant. Water it regularly and fertilize monthly. If grown outdoors, be sure to check for insect pests and treat if needed.

Please contact the University of California Cooperative Extension at 754-6477 or <http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu> with your agricultural questions. Information for this article was collected from the University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources.