

## Poinsettia

Poinsettias are beautiful plants adding a festive touch to Christmas celebrations and beyond. Commonly known as the Mexican flame, Christmas star or Christmas flower, with striking red displays at Christmas time, the plant is often used as a floral Christmas decoration. This Christmas symbol was virtually unknown in the Old World until the late 1820s, when Dr. Joel R. Poinsett – after whom the flower is named – a keen botanist, gardener and US ambassador to the newly independent Mexico, introduced it to his hometown in South Carolina. Never in his wildest dreams could he have predicted that it would become the leading potted flowering plant grown in the US (and elsewhere too, including Australia!). Recent studies of production quantities indicated that its numbers even exceed those for chrysanthemums!



The flower's association with Christmas can be traced back to Mexican folklore. Legend has it that a poor little child, who could not afford a gift to offer to Christ on Christmas Eve, picked some weeds from the side of a road and presented the bouquet as a gift at her church altar – such was the innocence of the child's love and humbleness, the weeds burst forth in a striking red colour. A magnificent red flower was born, the 'Flor de Noche Buena', Flower of the Holy Night or Nativity Flower.

The so-called 'flowers' are in fact the coloured bracts surrounding the real and rather insignificant flowers. The most common bract is red but, through creative breeding, poinsettia is now available in a wide range of colours from various shades of red and pink to lime green, cream, white and mottled. However, red still remains the most popular. Poinsettias can also be cut and used in flower arrangements, provided the stems are sealed. Dip the cut in boiling water or holding it over a flame for about 15 seconds will prevent the sap from oozing, and stopping the stem from wilting. Be aware that the latex in the stems can be irritating to persons or animals sensitive to it.

The wild poinsettia grows in moist wooded ravines on rocky hillsides, and comes into full bloom during the short days of winter. It begins to set buds and produce flowers as the winter nights become longer and the days shorter. Nowadays, with urbanization, this flowering habit can be tricky to achieve outside of a controlled green house environment. To flower your poinsettia, or to re-flower it after you bought the original in full bloom the previous season, you need to practice a bit of 'poinsettismo' – this word was coined by the Mexicans to describe intrusive and officious behaviour, referring to Dr.

Poinsett's unpopular policies in their country. Starting in early October, you need to provide the plant with 14 hours of total darkness each night before Christmas. This is not too difficult for folks in the northern hemisphere, where October is the beginning of longer nights and shorter days, but for us, 'down under' Australians, where October is the reverse, season-wise, this task is a real challenge! When we see poinsettias sold in full bloom at Christmas time, we can be sure that they have been manipulated! (An interesting anecdote: In Vietnam, one common name for poinsettia is 'the advocate's tongue', no doubt referring to the resemblance of the bract to the tongue (especially that of an advocate, who is an expert at twisting his tongue and manipulating his message!).



In the cooler and frost prone part of Australia such as the Upper Blue Mountains, we need to bring our tropical plant poinsettia indoors by autumn and if we want to make it bloom in summer, we need to trick it

into thinking it's receiving the longer winter nights it needs to trigger blossoms; we need to pretend that October is the approach of winter, with longer nights and shorter days ahead. This is not particularly easy especially with daylight saving when we tend to stay out in the garden longer. We have to persevere with the intrusive 'poinsettismo' routine by looking after our plant like a baby or a pet, putting it to bed at 5pm in a dark room so that it will get 14 hours of sleep before dawn breaks in the very small hours of the morning, for 10 weeks before Christmas. Then we will be rewarded with magnificent blossoms for the festive season.

I must confess that I prefer the easy way out by visiting my favourite nursery and choose a perfect pot of poinsettia to decorate my Christmas table!



*Merry Christmas*