

December Jewels, 2007: Poinsettias

The wild, red poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) is a native of Mexico and Central America. It was introduced into cultivation in the US by Joel Roberts Poinsett, first US ambassador to Mexico, in the 1820's, and was later named for him. One hundred years later, Paul Ecke Sr. of Encinitas, California sought to make potted poinsettias the official flower of Christmas. Through the breeding and business efforts of his family, his dream was realized by the early 1960's, and by the time of his death in the early 90's, Ecke poinsettias accounted for 80% of all plant sales at Christmas time.



Contrary to popular belief, poinsettias are not the least bit toxic, though like all Euphorbias they do contain a milky sap that can be irritating to some people's skin. Also, what most people take to be the flowers are actually modified leaves, called bracts, which surround the tiny, yellow, true flowers.

After so many decades of Ecke breeding, the options are far from being limited to the traditional red. Recent introductions include many bi-colored

varieties and unusual forms. Plum Pudding has purple bracts, Jingle Bell's bracts are red splashed with white, and the Winter Rose series have bracts that are curled and clustered like a dahlia. All of these new varieties should do as well in the Florida garden as the traditional red, giving us some interesting landscaping options for winter color. Much is



made of the poinsettia's need for consistent hours of darkness in the fall to initiate blooming for the holidays. I have found that they do just fine on their own, with the decreasing daylight hours of October naturally inducing flower production toward the end of November. Just avoid planting them in a location where strong artificial light will reach them at any time during the night. Bract color peaks in late December and early January, eventually fading in March.

To produce the fullest plants with the most colorful bracts, plant them in rich soil with perfect drainage. Poinsettias grow well in full sun, but not extreme heat, so choose a location away from the hottest sun, where the plants will be in light shade or partial shade in the fall and winter. Keep them consistently moist, and fertilize once a month from March through September. Pruning after September 10 will not allow enough time for colorful bracts to develop on all branches. Pinch them back in early March, May and July, and if they need it again, before September 10. This will give you a plant with lots of branches that doesn't get too tall or leggy.

