

## Poinsettia Makes a Wonderful House Plant

Poinsettias are striking plants with colorful bracts (modified leaves) surrounding small yellow flowers in the center. With care poinsettia should retain its beauty for weeks. Some newer varieties stay attractive for many months.

Poinsettias are sensitive to sudden drops in temperature. Any temperature below 50 degrees F causes leaves or bracts to wilt or drop. Be careful when transporting it to your home. Excessive water floods the soil, causing roots to die from lack of oxygen. If the pot is covered with foil, puncture the bottom of the foil to allow good drainage. When using a saucer to protect furniture, elevate the pot to provide free water drainage. Never leave poinsettia sitting in a basin of water.

Correct watering is important, as with all plants in the home. Yellowing of leaves and dropping of bracts can occur when the roots become dry for even a short period of time. Our winter homes have warm temperature and lower humidity which may cause yellowing of leaves and dropping of bracts. Do not place near heaters or drafts. Insects are not usually a problem on poinsettias in the home. White flies, mealy bugs and scale can be controlled with insecticidal soap or summer oil.

Once a poinsettia is past the flowering stage, gradually dry down the plant by not watering as often. The leaves will fall with a dormant stem left. Water just enough to keep the stem from shriveling. In April, transplant to a larger pot, cut back the whole plant to 4 to 6 inches from the top of the pot, increase the watering frequency. Within a few weeks new shoots will emerge.

After danger of frost is past, plant your poinsettia outdoors, burying the pot up to the rim in ground. To keep the plant low and compact, pinch back the growing shoots, leaving 4-5 true leaves per stem every 3-4 weeks. The pinched shoots then branch out and create a bushier plant. To initiate flowers before Christmas, stop pinching plant shoots after Labor Day.

Fertilization of the poinsettia during its growing season differs little from any other plant. A good house plant fertilizer recommended for foliage plants will work fine. Feed weekly at half strength. The poinsettia will grow in a soil pH of 4.5 to 7.5, provided the proper key nutrients are supplied. A pH of 6.5 is ideal.

The poinsettia sets flowers when nights are long. Without long nights, this plant will continue to produce leaves, will grow and never flower. Bring your poinsettia into the house before frost, usually around mid-September, and keep it in an unlighted room during the night after October 1 to induce flowering. If such a room is not available, cover the plants with a cardboard box from 5 p.m. to 8 a.m. from October 1 until bracts appear and are well formed, usually within six weeks.

Give the plant as much light as possible during the day. Maintain a night temperature between 65 to 70 degrees F. Poinsettia does best in a sunny location away from heat outlets or drafts.

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