



Poinsettias: Care, Maintenance and Reblooming

Easier Than it Sounds, Rewarding, and Fun!

A Brief History of Poinsettia

Euphorbia pulcherrima, more commonly known as the poinsettia, is one of the most popular potted flowers in the United States. Poinsettias have been considered as a holiday plant in the United States since the 1820s. They are native to southern Mexico, the poinsettia is named after Joel R. Poinsett, the first United States ambassador to Mexico. Poinsett introduced the poinsettia to the U.S. in 1825.

Today poinsettias decorate nearly every American household and business during the winter holiday season. After the holidays most people discard their poinsettias and purchase new ones next year. However, it's possible to keep the plant in good condition into March, maintain it over the summer, and re-flower it for next year's holiday season. This process may seem overwhelming at first, but it can be easy and satisfying to keep and rebloom the same poinsettia year after year.

Re-flowering Your Poinsettia

In early April, even though "poinsettia season" is still eight or nine months away, begin to cut back on the amount of water the poinsettia receives, and place the plant in a cool place, about 60 degrees Fahrenheit, where it will receive indirect light. But don't deprive the plant of so much water the stem shrivels and dries, as that will kill the plant.

In May, cut back the remaining stems to three to six inches above the soil. This is a good time to re-pot the plant or separate the stems if there are several in the original pot. Use a pot with good drainage and a quality potting soil which has been pasteurized to kill any diseases. You can find potting soil at any garden store and at most box stores. Water the soil thoroughly. You may want to treat the plant with a broad-spectrum fungicide, also available at garden stores.

Place the poinsettia in a sunny window location and water when the soil feels dry to the touch. Fertilize every two to three weeks with a complete fertilizer (commonly 200-300ppm N), following directions on the fertilizer label for flowering plants. When the minimum outdoor temperature is consistently above 60 degrees Fahrenheit, you can move your poinsettia outside to a partly shaded place. When the shoots begin to grow, you'll need to water the plant more often.

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Did you know that is possible to train your potted poinsettia plants to re-flower the following year?

Pinched back your poinsettia plant to control the height and promote a fuller plant. Make the first pinch when the first shoots are several inches long, or around the first week of July. Simply remove the upper inch of growth on each stem, leaving about four or five leaves per stem. This promotes the growth of more branches and ultimately a fuller plant. The plant will secrete a milky white sap wherever it's pinched. Rinse this off with a gentle shower from a hose. A second pinching may be necessary in the middle of August.

Toward the end of August and the beginning of September, bring the poinsettia indoors to a sunny location where the temperature is between 65 and 75 degrees Fahrenheit. Poinsettias are what horticulturists call "short-day" plants. This means that to produce flowers, they must experience days with less than 12 hours of daylight. Most varieties of poinsettias require eight to 10 weeks of short days to flower. For color by December 18, short days need to start on October 9. If you want your poinsettia to bloom earlier or later, simply adjust the initiation of short days. Plants are attractive for four to six weeks after the target flowering date.

To initiate short days keep the plant in complete darkness from 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. Placing the plant in a dark closet or a light-proof box will accomplish this. Any light received during the dark period will delay flowering. During the day, the plant still needs light for growth. Place the plant in a sunny location from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., and continue to water as needed. Fertilize every week according to the fertilizer label. Once color is visible, it's no longer necessary to keep the poinsettia in complete darkness during the night. At this time the plant will flower with any amount of daylight.

Although this process may seem time-consuming and confusing at times, it is a great accomplishment to re-bloom poinsettias for several years. You may find the following schedule useful as a reminder of the many requirements.

Directions at a Glance

February-early march: Cut back each of old flowering stems 4-6 inches in height

April 1 - Reduce watering, 60 degrees Fahrenheit

May - Cut back to 3-6 inches above the soil. Apply a fungicide. Re-pot or separate if needed. Place in sunny window and water when dry to touch.

June - Move plant outside (weather permitting). Water and fertilize more frequently as plant grows.

July 1 - First pinch.

August 15 - Second pinch.

September 1 - Bring plant indoors.

October 9 - Initiate short days and reduce the amount of fertilizer.
(For a December 18 bloom date).

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