
UNH Cooperative Extension Info Line Question of the Week

Question: Where do poinsettias come from?



Answer: The history of the poinsettia begins in Mexico where they were cultivated by the Aztecs before Christianity came to the Western hemisphere. The poinsettia was native to an area called Taxco del Alarcon in southern Mexico. Growing year round as a woody shrub up to ten feet high, the poinsettia bloomed during the shorter days of winter.

Because of its brilliant color, the poinsettia flower was considered a symbol of purity. It was highly prized by Kings Netzahualcoyotl and Montezuma, even though they could not grow it in the cooler climate of present-day Mexico City. The Aztecs used the plant they called “cuetlaxochiti” in daily life. They made a purplish dye from the bracts (the colored parts we think of as the flowers), and used its milky sap to treat fevers. Perhaps the first use of the poinsettia for a holiday was during the 17th century. Franciscan priests near Taxco used the flower in a nativity procession.

The first person responsible for the poinsettia’s current popularity was Joel Roberts Poinsett, ambassador to Mexico from 1825 to 1829. Mr. Poinsett, a keen botanist, sent poinsettia plants to his greenhouses in South Carolina in 1828. There he propagated the plants, sending them on as gifts to friends and relatives. One of the plant’s recipients, Colonel Robert Carr, introduced the poinsettia into cultivation and trade in 1829. An Act of Congress declared December 12, the date of Joel Poinsett’s death, as National Poinsettia Day in commemoration of the man and the plant.

Got questions? UNH Cooperative Extension Education Center’s Info Line offers practical help finding answers for your lawn and garden questions. Call toll free at 1-877-398-4769, M-F, 9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m., or e-mail us at answers@unh.edu