**Holiday Flower: Poinsettia**

Poinsettias are probably the most popular plant purchased during the winter holiday season. The leafy plants are topped with colored bracts—often incorrectly referred to as flowers or flower petals. The actual flowers on the plants are the very tiny, berrylike growths at the center of the colored bracts.

While originally recognized for their bright red bracts, the plants today are available in a dizzying array of colors, sizes and shapes.

**Poinsettia Variety**

If you like more of a contemporary style for your holiday decorating, today’s newer varieties of poinsettia may appeal to you more than the traditional red. Today, in addition to burgundy and pink, you can find salmon, plum, pale yellow, red-orange, white and even lime green.

The “flowers” also come in bicolors—a mix of two hues—along with stripes, marbling and spots. Some have bracts that are crinkled and curled, while others are twisted and ripply.

Every year, new cultivars are introduced with even greater variety in their colors and sizes. From giant, 3-foot tall plants to miniature versions, you’ll even find some options that are tinted or dyed to provide an even wider selection to match your holiday decor.

**Purchasing Poinsettias**

When choosing which plants to buy, look carefully at the cyathia—the small, yellow and red berrylike flowers in the middle of the colored bracts. They should be unopened and show no pollen. All the colored bracts should be solid without green or dried edges, and no bruises or blemishes. Avoid plants with droopy, yellowed or browning leaves. Foliage should be dark and plentiful.

Once you get your poinsettia home, immediately remove the protective, plastic sleeve in which you transported it. If you leave the sleeve on for too long, the plant will begin to wilt and its pot life will be greatly diminished.

**Caring for Poinsettias**

Place your plants in a spot that will allow them to receive at least six hours of bright, though indirect, sunlight each day.

They prefer temperate living conditions, so move them to a warmer room if night-time temperatures will drop below 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Cooler temperatures will keep them blooming longer, but temperatures that are too cool will damage the plants. (Their native home is warm climates.)

Water the plants when the soil surface is dry, saturating the soil until water drains out of the pot’s bottom and the soil is moderately moist—not soaking. Empty any standing water so the plant doesn’t sit in it.

If you see the leaves beginning to wilt, water immediately.

One way to ensure the plants thrive is to place the pots on trays of pebbles. Water can then drain out of the bottom of the pot and then evaporate into the air, providing humidity, which benefits the plant.

You can also aid the plant by misting its leaves and keeping it out of drafts from furnace vents, fireplaces and room heaters. Keep poinsettias away from doorways, too, which can expose them to frigid temps.

**Long Pot Life**

Depending on how early you purchase your poinsettias, they can last long past the holiday season—up to several months. If conditions are right, many people have even experienced the blooms continuing nearly year-round.

For most, however, the colored leaves will wilt and fall off by mid-January, leaving simply a leafy plant. While you may consider trying to encourage your poinsettia to “rebloom” with new colored bracts, the process is difficult and involves placing the plant in the dark for a specific period, limiting its exposure to light and watering according to a special schedule. For most people, the affordability of the plants allows them to be tossed at the end of the season with little regret.

**Poinsettias and Produce**

Some varieties of poinsettia are especially sensitive to ethylene. This is a colorless, odorless gas produced by fruits and vegetables as they ripen. While humans and animals experience no ill effects from the gas, some plants and flowers are greatly harmed by it. When poinsettias are exposed, their bracts and leaves will droop, and the stems to the leaves will twist and drop off.

Other causes of leaf drop are temperatures that are too low, too little light, over- and underwatering, extremes in temperatures from drafts and air that is too dry.