



The Care and Feeding of Poinsettias

By Emily Johnston, December 2003

March:

The flowers (the little yellow pods) will have dropped off, but the bracts may still be colorful. Be that as it may, cut the stems off. Note: the later in the season you do this, the shorter the new growth will be. If you want to encourage the "tree" to grow higher, then cut the stems longer. If the plant is tall enough to suit you, then cut the stems to about 2 inches. Put the plant in a cool place away from light to rest for about 2-3 weeks, or until you see new growth emerging. At that point, place the plant in a bright sunny area, water and fertilize. When all danger of frost is past, the plant can be left outdoors for the summer.

May - September:

By mid-June there should be significant new growth and lateral growth will start to appear. Selectively remove the smaller lateral shoots so that the main shoots will be strong. Fertilize every 2-3 weeks with an all-purpose fertilizer. Plants should be in full sun (at least 6 hours per day). They need lots of water. If plants are too tall, pinch back growing tips (but this will encourage branching).

October:

At the end of September spritz the plants with an insecticidal soap spray and after that dries bring them indoors. NOTE: watch the weather -- poinsettias will not take temperatures below about 40 degrees. Now begin the regime to make them bloom - nighttime temperatures of 50 - 60 degrees is the key, and shield from artificial light. By November the bracts should begin to show color, and by the end of November the beginnings of the blossoms should be evident. At that point you can put them where you can see and enjoy. Light levels should be bright light but not too much direct sun; heat levels between 60 and 70.

After the blooms set, cease fertilizing, but continue to water heavily. Poinsettias are thirsty. In October and November some leaves will yellow and drop - this is normal for plants brought indoors.

The plant will live forever, so keep that in mind. Anytime it gets too tall, you can cut it back to the trunk, which will push new buds in the spring. Also, tree-trained plants are top-heavy and should be potted in ceramic (as opposed to plastic) pots. Poinsettias "bleed" white sap when they are cut - this is normal. If you want to use the flowers as cut flowers after you lop the plant in the early spring, cauterize the stem by burning the end with a match to keep it from bleeding, put in water. The bloom will last a week or more.