A Calendar of Care for a Holiday Favorite:

Poinsettias
Dr. Joan Bradshaw
University of Florida IFAS Extension
Citrus County Extension Service
3650 West Sovereign Path- Suite 1
Lecanto, FL 34461
352-527-5700

Poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) remain one of the most popular holiday flowers. Hybridizers have expanded the range of colors from the familiar red to pastel yellow and vibrant bi-colors. One of the most common questions after Christmas is “How can I care for my poinsettia so that it will bloom again next Christmas?” While this can be done, it’s a very fussy, exacting process and since the plants are not that expensive, you might just choose to start fresh next year.

Beautiful as they are in the store, holiday plants don’t always make an easy transition into your home. Here are some tips for choosing holiday plants and caring for them through the holidays and afterward. For those of you who are undaunted, the process for saving your poinsettia and getting it to rebloom begins with the care you give it the first season.

When You First Bring Your Poinsettia Home

**Light** - Place it near a sunny window. South, east or west facing windows are preferable to a north facing window. Poinsettias are tropica ls and will appreciate as much direct sunlight as you can provide.

**Heat** - To keep the poinsettia in bloom as long as possible, maintain a temperature of 65 - 75 degrees F. during the day. Dropping the temperature to about 60 degrees F. at night will not hurt the plant. However, cold drafts or allowing the leaves to touch a cold window can injure the leaves and cause premature leaf drop. If you’ve ever see a gangly poinsettia in bloom, with only a couple of sad looking leaves hanging on, it was probably exposed to temperatures that were too cool or extreme shifts in temperature.

**Water** - Water the plant whenever the surface feels dry to the touch. Water until it drains out the bottom, but don’t let the plant sit in water. Wilting is another common cause of leaf drop. A wilted plant can be revived and salvaged, but it will take another season to improve its appearance.

**Humidity** - Lack of humidity during dry seasons, in particular winter, is an ongoing houseplant problem. If your home tends to be dry and your poinsettia is in direct light, you will find yourself watering frequently, possibly every day.

After Holiday Care

**After the Holidays**
Many people want to keep their poinsettias alive well after the holidays and into the following year. After the holiday decorations have been safely stowed away for another year, your
poinsettia will now need a bit of attention. Throughout the winter, keep the plant somewhat dry and do not fertilize until the weather warms in spring. After the weather has begun to warm, cut off the fading bracts, leaving 4-6 inches of the stem on each branch. Begin fertilizing with a well-balanced fertilizer. Move the plant outdoors to a partly shady situation. Eventually you’ll want to place your poinsettia in a full-sun location, but give the plant a week or two to adjust to both temperatures and brighter light levels before doing so.

**Selecting a Planting Site**

Poinsettias can be used in landscapes as accent plants or informal flowering hedges, as container plants for patios and decks, and as cut flowers for interior decorations. They should be planted in areas where they receive full sun most of the day. However, it is essential that they receive no light at night during the bud-setting period. Poinsettias require a long, dark period before they will initiate flower buds. Normally, they set flower buds in early October when nights are becoming increasingly longer. If the dark period is interrupted with the light from a window, street light or any other light source, flowering will be markedly delayed or the plant may not flower at all. Just a short period of light during the dark period is enough to delay or prevent flowering. This should be kept in mind when poinsettias are used in the landscape, and they should be planted in areas that will be completely dark during the night. Poinsettias grow best in moist, well drained, fertile soils. However, they will grow satisfactorily in a wide range of soils, including sand, muck, and clay. Soil pH should ideally range from 5.5 to 6.5, but it need not be adjusted if between 5.0 and 7.0. The soil must be well drained because poinsettias will not grow well in wet areas.

**Planting**

Plants can be purchased in early spring, or the Christmas poinsettia can be removed from its container and planted outdoors as soon as danger of frost is past. A general rule is to dig a hole one foot wider and six inches deeper than the root ball. Backfill the hole with enough soil so the plant will sit in the hole at the same depth as it was growing in the container. Firm the soil to prevent settling, then gently place the plant straight in the hole and fill around the ball with soil. Water thoroughly while planting to remove air pockets. Mulch around the plant with organic materials to conserve moisture and help control weeds.

**General Care**

**Watering**

Water relations are a crucial consideration for growing poinsettias, since prolonged dryness will result in the loss of lower leaves. The soil should be kept moderately moist at all times. Frequency of watering will depend greatly on soil type, time of year and weather conditions.

**Pruning**
Poinsettias should be pruned in early spring after blooming is over and the danger of frost has passed. They should be cut back to within 12 to 18 inches of the ground unless they have been frozen below this point, in which event they should be cut back to “live” wood. Pinching the plant during growing season will result in a compact plant at flowering time, rather than one with a few long, unbranched canes. After four weeks or when it is 12 inches long, new growth should be cut back, leaving four leaves on each shoot. This procedure should be repeated every time the new growth develops until about September 10. New growth after the last pinch will usually grow to a length of 8 to 10 inches and, in the first week of October, will initiate flower buds. However, pruning after September 10 does not allow enough time for side shoots to grow and develop before bud initiation in early October. As a result, the bracts will be much smaller than those on a plant where the last pinch was made before September 10.

**Re-bloom Poinsettias**

Re-blooming is a tricky proposition in most parts of Florida for two reasons. One- In central Florida, killing frosts and freezes usually arrive before plants have a chance to develop their flowers. Two- plants require 14 hours of complete darkness each day for 6-8 weeks before flowering. This is usually difficult to provide in the home or landscape due to outdoor street or security lights which will prevent flowering. If you are determined to try re-blooming however, here is a brief timeline to help you in getting a second year of flowering from your poinsettia.

- In July cut the plant back to about 2/3 the height you desire for your holiday season.
- On October first, begin 14 hours of uninterrupted darkness each night, every night without interruption, and continue this until the holidays arrive. Each night you do not provide uninterrupted darkness roughly equals a one day delay in getting holiday color.
- Around the last week of November, you can stop the darkness treatment and allow the plant to remain in the window. You should see flower buds at this point. Keep watering and treat your plant the way you did when you first brought it home in bloom.

If all has gone well, your poinsettia should be back in bloom and ready to begin the process all over again for another happy holiday season.

For more information, please contact Citrus County Extension at 352-527-5700.

---

Citrus County Extension links the public with the University of Florida/IFAS’s knowledge, research, and resources to address youth, family, community, and agricultural needs. Programs and activities offered by the Extension Service are available to all persons without regard to race, color, handicap, sex, religion, or national origin. Citrus County – Providing Solutions for Your Life.

Dr. Joan Bradshaw is director of Citrus University of Florida/IFAS Citrus County Extension.