Five Truths About Poinsettias

Poinsettias are the number one flowering potted plant sold in the United States, even though almost all are sold during the month of December. So how is it that there are so many misconceptions about their growth and care? Keep reading to find the 5 holiday truths about poinsettias!

1. The showy colored parts of the poinsettia that most people think of as flowers, are actually called bracts, or modified leaves. The flower is the small yellow parts in the center of the colorful bracts. When choosing a poinsettia at the nursery, look for one with little or no yellow pollen showing on the flower. This means the poinsettia will last much longer through the holiday season.

2. Poinsettias are NOT poisonous if ingested. Our mothers always warned us to keep the poinsettias on a high table away from pets and little fingers. While there is a small grain of fact behind this, rest assured your pets and children are safe. A research study by Ohio State University found that a fifty-pound child who ate five hundred bracts might develop a slight tummy ache. Some people may have an allergic reaction if the milky sap comes in contact with their skin.

3. Poinsettias are perennial flowering small trees native to central Mexico. So please do not set them outside on your porch in the freezing night temperatures! Any temperature below 50 degrees Fahrenheit will lead to chilling injury and the quick decline of your formerly beautiful plant. The bracts will begin to look blue or whitish and the leaves may drop.

4. Poinsettias need water! Over-watering might be the number one killer of houseplants, but under-watering is the number one killer of poinsettias. A poinsettia that is allowed to dry out quickly looses its leaves and dies. This is not a good look for your Christmas table centerpiece! So water regularly, make sure there is proper drainage (punch a couple holes in the foil pot liner), and enjoy your poinsettia for that much longer.
5. Poinsettias can be re-flowered the following year. While it may be less of a hassle to go out and buy a new one the next holiday season, it is possible to keep one plant going for many years. Keep the poinsettia watered, in a sunny location, and fertilize monthly. Once the possibility of frost has passed, trim the main stems back to 3 or 4 inches and re-pot in a slightly larger container. Move the plant outdoors in the part-sun location for two weeks to acclimate and then into a full sun location for the duration of the season. Water frequently, pinch back if it gets too tall, and fertilize about every 2 weeks. Move the plant back inside when night temperatures begin to cool below 60 degrees F.

Knowing these 5 truths about poinsettias should lead you to proper selection and care of the perfect holiday plant. There are over one hundred varieties of poinsettias, so take your time picking one out. One of my personal favorites is ‘Jingle Bells’ with showy red and white speckled bracts. Enjoy the holiday season, be safe, and happy gardening! If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact me, Kerrie Roach, horticultural Extension agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, at (910) 671-3276 or by E-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu or visit North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center’s website at Robeson.ces.ncsu.edu.