

# Selecting a Poinsettia

by Jean M.

Master Gardener of Hunterdon County

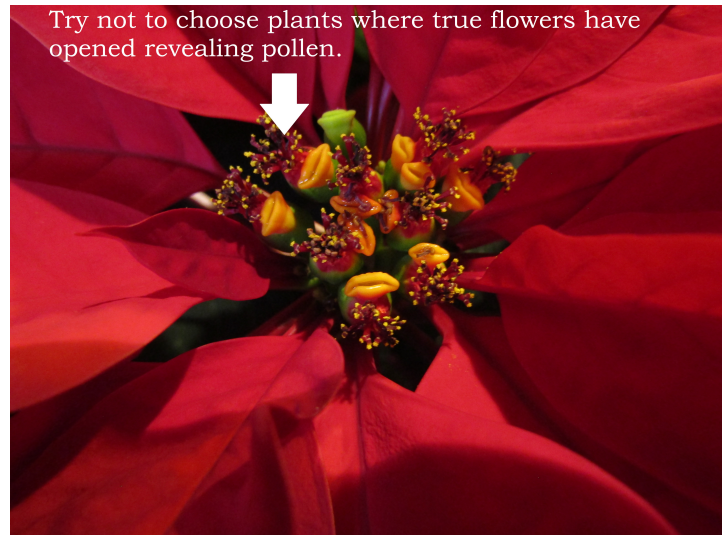
For many, no flower represents Christmas more than a poinsettia. Do you know how to select and care for one?

First, a little history on the poinsettia. The plant is native to parts of Central America and southern Mexico where it can grow into a perennial shrub 10 to 15 feet tall. The Aztecs used its white sap to control fevers, and the red bracts (modified leaves) to make a reddish dye. German botanist, Karl Ludwig Willenow, assigned it the botanical name *Euphorbia pulcherrima* meaning “very beautiful”. However, it was John Roberts Poinsett, the first US Ambassador to Mexico in the 1820s, who took cuttings from the plant, brought them back to his greenhouse in South Carolina and introduced them to the US. Hence the plant was named to honor him.

To select a fresh, healthy poinsettia it pays to take a close look at the plants on display to determine which might last the longest. For example:

- DO choose plants with dark green leaves all the way to the soil line. DON'T choose plants with yellow or falling leaves, are drooping or wilted.
- Look closely at the small true flowers located at the base of the colored bracts. DO choose plants where the true flowers are green or red tipped (first closeup). DON'T choose the ones where the true flowers are open revealing pollen (second closeup).
- The plant should be about 2 ½ times taller than the diameter of the container.
- Look for aphids and whiteflies under the leaves. DON'T buy the plant if you see any. You don't want to bring those critters home.
- Check the plant's soil. If it is wet and the plant looks droopy, that's not a healthy sign. It could have root rot.
- If possible, it is easier to assess the condition of a poinsettia if it is not in a plastic sleeve or crowded with others. Plastic sleeves, while a good protection against outdoor temperatures below 50 degrees F, can cause a plant to deteriorate more quickly. Overcrowded plants can cause premature bract loss.





With proper selection and care, a poinsettia can last 6 to 8 weeks in a home. Tips on how to care for your newly purchased poinsettia include:

- If your plant will be exposed to cold temperatures during transport, even for a few minutes, make sure it is temporarily wrapped/sleeved properly to prevent damage of leaves and bracts.
- Poke holes in the bottom of the foil so water can drain into a saucer or plate. Check the soil daily and water it ONLY if dry to the touch, allowing excess water to drain out. Discard the excess water.
- Place it in an area where it gets indirect light; about 6 hours of light daily is ideal.
- Poinsettias like daytime temperatures between 60-70 degrees F and around 55 degrees F at night. Consider moving a poinsettia to a cooler location at night to prolong its life. High temperatures will shorten a plant's life.
- Keep plants away from drafts.
- Be careful the plant's leaves do not touch cold windows.

If you would like to try encouraging your poinsettia to rebloom, Michigan State University Extension has a [good article](#) with directions. Note that it takes many months of specific care and the results are not always good.

The old wives' tale that poinsettias are [poisonous to humans is false](#). The **American Medical Association's Handbook of Poisonous and Injurious Plants** states, "other than occasional cases of vomiting, ingestion of the poinsettia plant has been found to produce no effect".

Additional information about poinsettia can be obtained at the [University of Illinois](#).

There are over a 100 varieties of poinsettias in a variety of colors beyond traditional red. Colors have expanded to include burgundy, pink, marble, white and speckled. December 12<sup>th</sup> is National Poinsettia Day so go out and purchase one or more for yourself or others!

