

Care for Your Poinsettia

It's poinsettia season again, so here are a few tips that will help you to select a healthy plant that will stay bright and colorful past the holiday season and into the new year.

The first step is to select a healthy plant that is near the beginning of its bloom cycle. Choose a poinsettia with dark green leaves and colorful bracts that are proportional to the pot size. The true flowers (small red or green knob-like forms projecting from the middle of the cluster of bracts) should have very little or no yellow pollen showing at the time of purchase. Make sure your plant is wrapped well to protect it from the cold as you leave the store. If it is very cold out, and you have a long way to drive, you may want to warm up the car before you take your plant outside. Poinsettias are native to the area around Mexico and are considered tropical plants –“ even a few minutes of below freezing temperatures can cause damage.

Once you get your plant home, unwrap it right away. In greenhouses, poinsettia are grown at temperatures ranging from 60-70° F, and this is the "ideal" range for them in your house. The poinsettia bracts will last longer if night temperatures are kept between 55°-60° F. High temperatures will shorten the life of the bracts.

Poinsettias are sensitive to both warm and cold drafts, so make sure not to set them near a heat register, fireplace or outside door that is constantly being opened and closed. Also, do not place poinsettias on warm surfaces such as a television or refrigerator. If you place your plant in a window, it should not be a drafty one, nor should the bracts or leaves come into contact with the cold glass.

Poinsettias do prefer full sun, which can be difficult to obtain in winter. Put them near a sunny window or under a grow-light, if possible. Be aware that in a south or west window that receives a lot of hot direct afternoon sun, the bracts may get scorched.

Keep the soil evenly moist but not wet. Allow the soil to dry out a bit in between waterings. If you lift the pot and it feels very light (compared to its weight just after the plant has been watered) it is probably time to water again. If the plant dries out excessively between waterings, you will probably notice some tip burn on the leaves and bracts.

While the poinsettia is in full bloom (in general, December through February) it should not be fertilized. However, if you plan to keep the plant past the holiday season, a general balanced houseplant fertilizer is a good idea.

Source: Don Janssen, UNL Extension Educator.