Poinsettias have rich holiday history

Flowers and potted plants are another type of agriculture that may be big in this area but it is in other parts of the state and country.

An example of the flower industry can be seen at this time—poinsettias for sale in retail and grocery stores. We see them on desks at work, in church sanctuaries and as stage decorations for performance events. The poinsettia has an interesting story—an obscure wild plant that makes it big as a favorite holiday tradition.

Poinsettias are native to Mexico and Guatemala. It was part of the Aztec culture before Europeans arrived. The sap was used to control fever and the colored bracts as a purgative dye.

Juan Nepomuceno Aguirre, a Franciscan missionary, may have been one of the earliest scientists to write about the plant in his records. However, it was not until 1834 that the plant was described as a new species in the Euphorbiaceae family. Johann Friederich Klotzsch named the plant as Euphorbia pulcherrima, which means very beautiful.

Today, botanists place poinsettias in the spurge family and give it the scientific name, Euphorbia pulcherrima.

However, it was Joel Roberts Poinsett that brought this euphorb from obscure science literature to mainstream Christmas plant. Poinsett was the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico and avid botanist. He wandered the Mexican countryside looking for new plant species.

In 1828 he came across a beautiful shrub with large red flowers. They were not the actual flower, but rather the leaf-like structures below the flowers called bracts. The actual flower is small and non-showy with white to yellow petals.

Poinsett took cuttings of the plant and sent them back to his South Carolina greenhouse. He began to propagate the plants and sent them to friends and botanical gardens.

They were first sold under the name Euphorbia pulcherrima. However, William Prescott, a historian and horticulturist, named the plant Poinsettia around 1856 in honor of Poinsett’s discovery. Other names for poinsettias include lobster flower and flameleaf flower.

It is believed that John Bartram, a nurseryman from Pennsylvania, was the first person to sell poinsettias. In the early 1900s the Ecke family of Southern California grew poinsettias outdoors for use as a cut flower and landscape plant.

The Ecke family began propagating poinsettias in the greenhouse and today grows over 70% of all poinsettias for sale in the United States and about 50% of worldwide sales.

Poinsettias are perennial shrubs in nature, growing 10 to 15 feet in height. There are more than 100 varieties of poinsettias today. Poinsettia bracts (the colored leaves that many people incorrectly call flowers) are traditionally red, but can also be white, pink, burgundy, orange, purple, maroon and speckled.

Since poinsettias are perennial plants, you can keep them and make them flower next year, although it is not easy. After blooming, gradually reduce water. The leaves will begin to fall off. After the leaves have dropped, store the plant in a cool place at 50 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit until spring. Water just enough to keep the roots from drying out.

In late April or early May, cut the plants back to 4-6 inches and fertilize. If multiple plants are in a pot you can divide plants as desired. Use a well-drained potting media. Water plants thoroughly and subsequently water when potting media becomes dry, never exposing roots to excess water.

Plants can be grown in the house outside once temperatures stay above 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Place plants in the house in a bright, sunny north window at a temperature below 75 degrees Fahrenheit. When placing plants outside place them in a partially shaded area. Fertilize plants every two weeks.

At the end of August, cut the plants back to 4-6 inches. If plants are placed outside, take them inside when nighttime temperatures go below 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Place them near a sunny south-facing window out of a draft. Keep nighttime temperatures below 75 degrees Fahrenheit.

After Sept. 25, place the plants in complete darkness for 12-14 hours each day until the colored bracts begin to appear. Do not allow any light into this area during the dark time.

Any amount of light for even a few seconds can prevent the bracts from turning colors. Plants will need light during the day. It is also best to keep the plants at temperatures between 60 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

After the colored bracts develop, plants will no longer require a 12-14 hour complete-dark period to keep their color.

As you can see, it is a lot easier to purchase a new plant each December rather trying to keep one and get it to flower the next year.

I want to close this article with a Mexican legend about the poinsettia. A Mexican child wanted to present a gift to baby Jesus at the Christmas Eve service, but she had no appropriate gift. Her cousin reminded her that a most humble gift given in love would be acceptable.

While on her way to church, she gathered a handful of stems and leaves from a common plant found in the area. When she presented her gift, the bouquet suddenly turned into blooms of brilliant red.

All present thought this to be a miracle, and from that day forward the bright red flowers were known as the Flowers of the Holy Night, for they bloomed each year during the Christmas season. Thus, the poinsettia has become an important decoration of many church sanctuaries during the Christmas season.

Whether it be at church, a school event or in your home, I hope poinsettias add joy to your family and friends during this Christmas season. Merry Christmas.

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