

Bluestem Breezes  
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## Poinsettia History

I just love this holiday season! The vibrant colors of decorations – red, green, silver, gold – light displays, Christmas trees, garlands, and the list goes on!

Many people look forward to this season for the annual poinsettia sales. I can't believe all of the varieties available these days. Have you noticed all of the options in the stores?

For this week's column, K-State Specialist Cheryl Boyer, discusses the history of poinsettias. For the flower lover, I think you'll especially enjoy this information. Please, read on:

I'm going out on a limb here, talking about a floriculture crop (since I'm a nursery specialist), but 'tis the season to talk about jolly things. Poinsettia plants certainly are jolly, aren't they? Their bright red bracts (modified leaves) are so bright and colorful that they've become an integral part of the holiday season.

In fact, Franciscan monks who settled near the native habitat (Taxco, Mexico) of *Euphorbia pulcherrima* first used them in nativity processions in the 17th century. There, they are very large deciduous shrubs, reaching up to 15 feet in height. It wasn't until 1825 that poinsettias were introduced to the U.S. market. Joel Poinsett, a skilled botanist who happened to be the first U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, brought plants back to his home in Greenville, South Carolina and shared them with botanical gardens and horticultural friends. The rest is history.

In 1902 Albert Ecke, an immigrant from Germany, began a cut-flower business in California. Soon (1909ish) he started to specialize in poinsettias and the company has since become world renowned as experts in poinsettia production. They are a generous company, producing numerous books and guides for growing poinsettias. Because they are willing to share their knowledge and production tools, they have become the go-to supplier for poinsettia cuttings around the world.

In a nutshell, growing a poinsettia crop is a complex task. Stock plants, from which un-rooted cuttings are collected, are housed at huge greenhouse operations in Mexico and Central America. Then, they are delivered to local growers in the U.S. within 48 hours. In July. That's right, your beautiful Christmas poinsettia started production about five months ago. They're picky, too. If the humidity, light, temperature, and nutrition aren't just right, you get sick or strange-looking plants. No one will buy a sick or strange-looking poinsettia!

Did you know that poinsettia plants didn't really become popular until about 20 years ago? It's true. Until 1963, poinsettias were only grown as cut flowers but new breeding resulted in potted plant production in 1964. Soon, new colors (other than red) were released into the market (seven in 1968). Improved durability and long shelf-life were also important breeding considerations. In the early 1990s, novelty cultivars began to take off in popularity. Now, in 2013, Paul Ecke

Ranch, Inc., offers 65 different cultivars of poinsettia cuttings with an additional eight for trial only...and they retired four cultivars. With names like Enduring™ Pink, Freedom™ Jingle Bells, Red Velvet™, Shimmer™ Surprise!, Snowcap, Sparkling Punch, Orange Spice™, Peppermint Twist™, and Visions of Grandeur™ how can you not get excited about a poinsettia?

While red is by far the most preferred poinsettia color, there are so many to choose from that you should definitely try at least one new one each year. I'm particularly intrigued by 'Plum Pudding' and hope I find one this year. Don't worry about cats and dogs (and children, for that matter) being poisoned if they eat a poinsettia—chalk that one up to urban legend—the worst that could happen is some mild irritation.

As a last note, toss your poinsettia on the compost pile after the holidays with no guilt. They are far too persnickety to keep alive and color up again next year (not to say that it can't be done...just too much work for me!). If they are exposed to temperatures 50°F or below, they are toast (keep them in sleeves when getting in and out of the car). Too much heat can cause them to decline as well. The list goes on and on. For more information about poinsettia care, check out [urbanext.illinois.edu/poinsettia](http://urbanext.illinois.edu/poinsettia). Enjoy the holidays and don't forget to waste some time with the people you love!

Happy Holidays!