



Environmental Horticulture Notes

CARE OF CHRISTMAS POINSETTIAS DURING THE HOLIDAY SEASON



To help poinsettias look their best for the holidays, place them where they receive lots of light but will not be exposed to rapid changes in temperature. Temperatures which are comfortable for people are suitable for poinsettias during the day. At night, the temperature should not go below 55° to 60° F.

They should be watered only when the surface of the soil feels dry. Keeping the soil too wet encourages root rot which causes the plants to wilt, then die. Before watering, make sure the drain holes at the bottom of the pots are open, then apply enough water so that a little runs out the bottom of each pot to flush excess salts out of the soil. Allowing excessive salts to accumulate in the soil results in badly burned leaves and the plants lose their beauty before they should. The drain water should be thrown away. If the base of the pot is allowed to sit in the drain water, the water can be reabsorbed, carrying the salts back into the root ball. With reasonable care, the modern varieties maintain their beauty for several months.

SAVING THE PLANTS FOR NEXT YEAR

After the bloom is over and the leaves drop, cut the stems, leaving two or three buds on each. If the plants lose their leaves in January or February, place them in a cool place until the end of March. Give them only enough water to keep the plants from shriveling. If the plants do not drop their bloom or leaves, no rest period is needed. Simply put them out-of-doors in spring.

IN THE SPRING

After all danger of frost is over, water the plants well and put them out-of-doors in a place where they will receive sun all day. Some planting mixes absorb water very slowly when dry, so special attention may be needed to get the soil thoroughly wet. This can be overcome by setting the pots into a tub of water. The water level should be high enough to cover the soil. It may take 15 or 20 minutes or more for the soil to become thoroughly soaked. With a light soil mix, the pot may float around without absorbing much, if any, water unless they are held down so the water can cover the soil. After the soil is thoroughly saturated, make sure the drain hole in the bottom of the pot is open so the excess water can drain. After the initial soaking, the plants should be watered only when the surface of the soil feels dry.

Most poinsettia plants become much larger the second year, so it is a good idea to put them into pots that are 2 or 3 inches larger than those in which they spent their first season. When re-potting, use a soil mix as much like the original as possible. Scar the soil ball with a wooden label or some such instrument so the roots no longer form a solid mass outside the soil ball. This will help get the roots started growing into the new soil.

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PINCHING

As the plants develop new shoots, allow them to grow to be eight or nine inches long. Pinch back the growing tip, leaving about three nodes on each shoot. As the plants grow, repeat the pinching process several times during the summer. The last pinch should take place about Labor Day.

IN THE FALL

Before frost, move the plants indoors. To get them to bloom for Christmas, they must have complete darkness at least 12 hours each night starting October 1. This may be done by putting them in a dark closet each night. Be sure the closet is completely dark, because a little light sneaking under the closet door may be enough to prevent buds from forming. However, once the buds are formed, hopefully by November 15, the plants are ready for the normal indoor light and temperature conditions suggested for the holiday season.

References from:

- Sunset's Western Garden Book, Lane Publishing Company
- New Illustrated Encyclopedia of Gardening, Greystone Press
- Flowering Plants for Modern Living, Merchant Publishing Company