

# gardening

## TROPICAL TRANSPLANT

Some tips for keeping the tropical Poinsetta healthy in frigid Massachusetts.

By Pat Leuchtman

Poinsettias are as closely associated with Christmas as the holly and the ivy, mistletoe, candy canes and Kris Kringle. Holiday displays are banked with the vibrant red blooms and they are on sale in nurseries, florists and even in some supermarkets. It is probably the single most popular plant given as a gift during the Christmas season.

Poinsettias that are purchased in full bloom during the holidays will remain cheerfully bright and vigorous when Christmas is only a memory. I spoke to Frank Yetter at Yetter's Florist and he said that many customers who come in to buy their Easter lilies in the spring often say that their poinsettias are still blooming after providing a heartening note of color all winter.

Actually the bright pink, red or white blooms are not the poinsettia's true flowers at all; they are the petal-like bracts that surround a very unassuming little flower. Still, to maintain these bracts for as long as possible the plant should be kept in a sunny, draft-free spot, with high humidity if that is possible. To give a plant what it needs to remain healthy it is good to remember where it grows naturally and the poinsettia is a tropical plant. Down South, where it can be grown outdoors year round, it is a large shrub that will grow to 10 feet or more.

Frank Yetter said the poinsettia is not terribly demanding. "The most important thing is to keep it out of drafts. It shouldn't be placed where it will get chilled by blasts of cold air, but neither should it be situated near a vent where it could receive occasional bursts of hot air. Even temperatures are vital, within the range of 55 to 72 degrees."

You should also water it so that the soil stays moist, but not soggy, and don't let it dry out between waterings during the blooming period.

Even though the poinsettia will brighten your home all through the winter, that needn't be the end of the plant. When the bracts start to fade and fall, move the plant to a cooler location and start withholding water. To bloom again the plant must be allowed a resting period.

Eventually let the soil dry out and in early May cut the plant back, leaving only about 6 inches of stem. Start to water it again. This is a good time to repot using good rich soil, unless you are planning to put the plant directly in the garden when the weather is warm enough.

Whether you plant your poinsettia in the garden or just move it out-

doors in its pot to enjoy the summer sun, wait until the maple trees are in full leaf. This is a good indication that the weather will remain mild. To insure a luxuriant, bushy plant, keep pinching it back until September.

In the fall you will have to bring the plant indoors again and place it in a sunny window. This is a good time to fertilize.

The poinsettia is a short-day plant. This means it will not bloom without rest in the total dark. Even lamplight in your living room will keep it from blooming. It should have light only during natural daylight hours, and as we all know, these are all too short during the late fall. Some people resort to putting their poinsettias in the closet after sundown. While this may seem extreme, Frank Yetter says it is vital to insure bloom in December. □



Garden Calendar



The following information is provided by the Franklin County Extension Service:

### Now is the time to:

- give your hostess a holiday flower arrangement.
- use discarded evergreen boughs for mulching perennials.
- remove foil wrappers and ribbons from holiday plants to allow proper air circulation and water drainage.
- plan ahead for spring, order fruit trees early to obtain the varieties you want.

### Note:

- Deicing salt can have devastating effects on plant growth. Substitute sand for salt whenever possible.
- Houseplants need more humidity? Set them on pebbles in a tray containing water.
- MERRY CHRISTMAS!! □

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