

Aside from a Christmas tree, very few plants say Christmas like a poinsettia. It could be because of the brilliant red shades that are available, or that they compliment Christmas colors well, but you can't go anywhere during the Christmas season without running into a couple of poinsettias, real or fake. It's almost ironic that a woody perennial plant that's native to warm and sunny Mexico is a Christmas decorating staple.

But when you look at the natural lifecycle of a poinsettia, it becomes clearer why they are synonymous with Christmas. Some plants depend on the photoperiod in order to flower. This means that plants pay attention to how much light there is each day, and once they reach the required light amount, it will trigger the process to begin flowering. Poinsettias are known as short day plants, meaning that they need around twelve hours of uninterrupted darkness to start the process of coloring the bracts and making the flowers. It is also part of what makes it so difficult to get poinsettias to flower for multiple years. It can be done, but it's a labor intensive process. It may just be easier to buy a poinsettia each year.

There are a few things to look at when buying a poinsettia. The first thing is the flowers. The colored parts of the plant that are commonly thought to be the flower are actually bracts, which are modified leaves that usually have flowers at their base. The flowers of the poinsettia are actually the tiny yellow clusters in the center of the plants. These yellow flowers should, ideally, not be blooming yet when the plant is bought. This will result in the plant to keep the colored bracts longer than a plant that has already bloomed. The easiest way of knowing if the flowers have bloomed or not is if there is yellow pollen visible on the flowers or on the bracts. If there is no pollen, then the flowers haven't opened yet. After looking at the actual flowers, you should inspect the bracts and the leaves. Check the undersides for insects, damage, and white spots. These white spots could be a result of the leaf being broken, because poinsettias have white sticky sap, which is very similar to latex. You should avoid plants that have wilted leaves, because these leaves won't completely recover from wilting. The coloring of the leaves should be consistent and even. The color of the bracts is a little harder to judge, because poinsettias come in every color from red to cream to blue, although I suspect that those had a little help from spray paint. My favorite variety of poinsettia right now is one called glitter. No, they don't have glitter painted on them, which does happen and is bad for the plant. The bracts of glitter poinsettias are classic poinsettia red, but have been bred to have cream colored speckles all over the bracts, giving a glitter-like appearance. But no matter which variety you choose, there are a few basic rules to taking care of a poinsettia.

The first thing to remember when caring for your plant is that they are tropical. They cannot survive the Nebraska winter, so please be nice to them and keep them inside and away from cold windows and drafts. The next thing to be careful of is to not let the plant wilt. The leaves will never quite recover from it. As soon as the soil feels dry to the touch, the plant needs water. But like most plants, it should never be left sitting in water, so if you buy it with a decorative foil around the pot, consider cutting holes in the foil, removing the foil altogether, or be very vigilant that there isn't water sitting in the foil.

Poinsettias are gorgeous tropical plants that come in a variety of colors and shapes. When choosing a plant, it should be free of insects, have even color, and not be wilted. If there are white spots on the leaves that could mean that the leaves had been broken. Be sure to keep it watered, and away from the cold. Happy holidays, and have a merry Christmas! If you have any questions or would like to suggest a topic for me to write about, feel free to contact me at the Buffalo County Extension Office, at 308-236-1235, or [mearnest2@unl.edu](mailto:mearnest2@unl.edu).