

Taking Care of Poinsettias

By Kathleen Cue, Nebraska Extension Horticulture Educator

I had a client call me one September day and asked if it was time to bring her poinsettia into the light. Oh yes and by the way, she mentioned the plant had been stored in the closet for the past nine months. Hmm... On the positive side of things, I thought it was great she was aware that the absence of light instigated the poinsettia's coloration. Still, after 9 months with no water and sunlight, it was safe to say the plant was toast and it was best to throw it out.

How does one go about keeping a poinsettia, you ask? First, the newer hybrids are better than ever about keeping their leaves and colorful bracts (the flowers are the tiny yellow things at the center) well into March. So it's no big task to keep them in a bright window with regular watering to enjoy the poinsettia for quite some time.

Once the stems lose a lot of their leaves through senescence (the natural aging and loss of leaves) or because you forgot to water it once, you have two options for moving ahead. One is to cut back the stems by half. The poinsettia is a shrub, so you will get lots of new shoot growth from the shortened stems. The other option, and one that takes a little finesse, is to make it into a lollipop. Called a standard, the poinsettia can be trained into a single tall stem with a ball of leaves at the top. A poinsettia standard is created by selecting a strong, upright stem and then removing all of the remaining stems. Encourage new growth at the top by removing sprouts along the stem.

Poinsettias are native to Mexico and so do wonderfully during our hot summers. Before moving them to their outdoor location, make sure there is no danger of a late frost and then acclimate them to the outdoors through the process of hardening off. Once outdoors, plants can be moved to larger pots, fertilized regularly and pruned according to the desired shape.

Bring in plants before the first frost and place them in an east, west or south-facing window. Instigating the coloration of the bracts can be simple. If room lights remain off during the evening hours AND no street or yard light leaks in through the window during the evening, the poinsettia will develop colorful bracts on its own. Barring that, then begin the process in late September by placing the plant in a dark closet from 5:00 pm to 8:00 am and then moving it to a bright window from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm each day. Once the coloration of the bracts begins, the plants can be moved and left in a bright window.

With all the wonderful color poinsettias provide, it's a great indoor plant to grow your own fresh air! More information can be found here: <https://lancaster.unl.edu/hort/articles/2007/poinsettia.shtml>.