

Tale from the Garden

The shops are full of Poinsettias now & the great thing is that, thanks to modern plant breeding, they are available in a whole host of colours rather than just that vivid cerise-red with which they are most associated. Seasonal scarlet has long been the traditional choice but pale poinsettias can suit a prettier palette. Poinsettias are tender plants, which, if frosted or kept in temperatures that are too low, will result in leaf drop. When you get them home, stand them in good light rather than in a dingy corner & keep them away from radiators & other heat sources which may dry them out & cause the leaves to pucker & curl. Feel the compost every day & water as soon as it starts drying out. If you give them the conditions they like, a happy poinsettia will carry on being decorative right into the New Year.



Poinsettia plants are native to Central America, especially an area of southern Mexico known as 'Taxco del Alarcon' where they flower during the winter. The ancient Aztecs called them 'cuetlaxochitl'. The Aztecs had many uses for them including using the flowers (actually special types of leaves known as bracts rather than being flowers) to make a purple dye for clothes and cosmetics and the milky white sap was made into a medicine to treat fevers. (Today we call the sap latex!)

The poinsettia was made widely known because of a man called Joel Roberts Poinsett (that's why we call them Poinsettia!). He was the first Ambassador from the USA to Mexico in 1825. Poinsett had some greenhouses on his plantations in South Carolina, and while visiting the Taco area in 1828, he became very interested in the plants. He immediately sent some of the plants back to South Carolina, where he began growing the plants and sending them to friends and botanical gardens.

One of the friends he sent plants to was John Bartram of Philadelphia. At the first Philadelphia flower show, Robert Buist, a plants-man from Pennsylvania saw the flower and he was probably the first person to have sold the poinsettias under their botanical, or latin name, name 'Euphorbia pulcherrima' (it means, 'the most beautiful Euphorbia'). They were first sold as cut flowers. It was only in the early 1900s that they were sold as whole plants for landscaping and pot plants. The Ecke family from Southern California were one of, if not, the first to sell them as whole plants and they're still the main producer of the plants in the USA. It is thought that they became known as Poinsettia in the mid-1830s when people found out who had first brought them to America from Mexico.

There is an old Mexican legend about how Poinsettias and Christmas come together. As legend has it, a young girl named Pepita was travelling to her village to visit the Nativity scene at the chapel. Every Christmas Eve as everyone in the village gathered in the church for the Mass, every family would bring a gift for the Christ Child. Pepita did not have enough money to buy a present to give the baby Jesus at the service, so she gathered a bundle of roadside weeds and formed a bouquet.

She was upset that she didn't have more to offer, but she was reminded by her cousin that "even the most humble gift, given in love, will be acceptable in His eyes." Upon entering the chapel and presenting her bouquet to the Nativity Jesus, the bouquet of roadside weeds miraculously turned into a bouquet of beautiful red flowers that the locals knew as Cuetlaxochitl. From that day on, the bright red flowers were known as the 'Flores de Noche Buena', or 'Flowers of the Holy Night'.

The shape of the poinsettia flower and leaves are sometimes thought as a symbol of the Star of Bethlehem which led the Wise Men to Jesus. The red coloured leaves symbolize the blood of Christ. The white leaves represent his purity.

In today's language of flowers, red, white or pink poinsettias, the December birth flower, symbolize good cheer and success and are said to bring wishes of mirth and celebration. So whatever you're giving this Christmas, presents big or presents small, remember that when they are given in love, they will mean something special.