



Poinsettias



I was surprised to see Christmas trees already lit at the mall, even before Halloween. The poinsettias were not yet present, but no doubt they soon will be. Poinsettias are really perennials, meaning they produce flowers year after year. In Mexico, their original home, a plant can grow into a ten foot shrub! There are other holiday plants, but poinsettias are probably the most commonly used live one. They will be available everywhere as soon as the October pumpkins are finished. Although you probably will not wait until after December 25 to buy them, they will be considerably more affordable then!

The bright, showy, red, pink, white or speckled parts of a poinsettia are not flowers. They are modified leaves, called bracts. In the center of the bracts is a small yellow item. **That** is the flower. When buying one of these plants, look at their flowers. The freshest poinsettia will have very little yellow dust-like

pollen showing.

For these plants to create those brightly colored bracts there are some requirements. Poinsettias, and other holiday plants like chrysanthemums and Christmas cactus, require a certain period of darkness for flowering. It is incorrect to say more than 12 hours of dark, but that can be a very rough guide. Some people incorrectly believe this means putting the poor plant in a closet for six weeks. No, that only makes a very unhealthy, unhappy plant.

While it does need a long night, it also needs several hours of bright light provided by daylight or bright artificial light. These “short day plants” cannot flower if the days are too long; some varieties will not flower even if the night gets interrupted by turning on a light! There are about 100 cultivars, so the specific number of actual hours of light can vary considerably from cultivar to cultivar, and while many absolutely need a fixed number of hours of uninterrupted dark, some newer varieties flower even if someone does put on a lamp for a short period during the night.

Many people keep these plants around after the season, with the idea of getting them to flower again.

To keep poinsettias as houseplants, just pinch them back to a pleasing shape, otherwise they become gangly and woody. Keep them evenly moist. If the stems dry out they will lose leaves. These are plants that prefer temperatures in the seventies during the day, and the sixties at night, making them an indoor plant. To get them to flower again, give them more than 12 hours of darkness, followed by bright light. They will probably not be as pretty as they

previously were, but success yields a certain satisfaction. At the risk of not sounding encouraging, good luck.

The other holiday plants are much more forgiving than poinsettias, eager to flower again. Christmas cactus (or Halloween, Thanksgiving or Easter cactus) and chrysanthemums also require short days for flowering. Chrysanthemums are among the most adaptable, and will grow outside if they receive regular water and protection from the coldest weather.

Dr. Angela O'Callaghan is the Social Horticulture Specialist for Clark County Cooperative Extension. Contact ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu or 702-257-5581.