Poinsettia, a Winter Delight

Nothing signals the holiday season like Poinsettias. Poinsettias are the most popular Christmas plant and the best selling potted plant in the United States. Seventy-four percent of Americans still prefer red poinsettias, followed by white and then pink. The new fad is painted poinsettias that come in any color and are available through most florists.

The showy colored parts of poinsettias that most people think are the flowers are actually colored bracts (modified leaves). The flowers of the poinsettia are in the center of the colorful bracts. When selecting a poinsettia, a fresh poinsettia is one on which little or no yellow pollen is showing on the flower clusters in the center of the bracts.

Modern poinsettia varieties stay attractive for a long time if given proper care. Place your poinsettia in a sunny window or the brightest area of the room, but don't let it touch cold windowpanes. The day temperature should be 65 to 75 degrees F. with 60 to 65 degrees at night. Temperatures above 75 degrees will shorten bloom life, and below 60 degrees may cause root rot. Move plants away from windows at night or draw drapes between them to avoid damage from the cold.

Poinsettias are somewhat finicky in regard to soil moisture. Avoid over watering because poinsettias do not like "wet feet." On the other hand, if the plant is allowed to wilt, it will drop some leaves. So how do you maintain proper moisture? Examine the potting soil daily by sticking your finger about one inch deep into the soil. If it is dry to this depth, the plant needs water. When it becomes dry to the touch, water the plant with lukewarm water until some water runs out of the drainage hole, then discard the excess water. Be sure to punch holes in the foil covering the pot so the water can drain into a saucer.
It seems that every year about this time the rumor is resurrected that poinsettias are poisonous. This is NOT true. Though there may be an allergic reaction to the milky sap, there has never been a recorded case of poisoning.

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