



Highlights in

Horticulture

Baker County

December 2008

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Dear Extension Friends,

The holiday season is a time for family, friends, and giving thanks. One way of giving thanks to those special to you is to give a gift that keeps on giving: a plant that can be enjoyed for years to come or a tree planted in one's name that many can enjoy.

I wish everyone a happy and safe holiday and look forward to assisting the community with their horticulture questions, concerns, and needs in the coming year.

Best Regards,

Alicia

Alicia R. Lamborn
Horticulture Extension Agent



POINSETTIAS (*EUPHORBIA PULCHERRIMA*)

A native to Mexico, the poinsettia plant was originally used by the Aztecs during fall celebrations and to produce a red dye. The plant was later introduced to the U.S. in 1825 by Joel Poinsett, who at the time was an ambassador to Mexico. In the early 1900's, the Ecke family of southern California began growing poinsettias outdoors for use as landscape plants and for cut flower arrangements. Eventually the family started growing poinsettias in greenhouses and today is recognized as the leading breeder and producer of poinsettia plants in the United States.



In their native habitat, poinsettias are flowering perennial shrubs that grow up to ten feet tall. In other areas of the world however, they are the most popular and well known decorative potted plant during the winter holiday season. The showy colored parts of poinsettias that many people refer to as flowers, are actually colored modified leaves called bracts. The actual flowers of the plant, called cyathia, are located in the center of the colored bracts. In contrary to popular belief, poinsettias are not poisonous, although some people are mildly allergic to the white, milky sap they produce. Due to intensive breeding, the traditional red poinsettia is also available in a large variety of colors and color combinations, available in pink, peach, burgundy, white, yellow, and marbled colors as well. You can also find plants with varying leaf shapes and bract sizes, making them more unique.

Poinsettias are "short day" plants which means they naturally bloom in the fall and winter when day lengths are shorter. However, it is actually the extended period of darkness during the night that triggers flowering. If the dark period is interrupted by artificial light after October 1st, flowering will be delayed.

(Continued on page 2)



CHILDREN IN THE GARDEN –

Making Holiday Crafts From Plants & Seeds



Project #1: Christmas Tree Seed Ornaments

Draw tree on green poster board and cut out. Apply craft glue to entire surface and cover with lettuce seeds (extras can be shaken off). Glue dry corn seeds in diagonal pattern from branch to branch of tree to represent garland and one corn seed to the top of tree for a star. Sunflower seeds can be added as ornaments for the tree. When all glue has dried, a coat of clear spray sealant may be applied to help protect and secure the seeds (optional). Punch a hole in top of tree and insert ribbon through for hanger, or glue ribbon to top of the tree on the back side. Seeds of any type and shape can be used to make ornaments as long as they are untreated. Also, any shapes (stockings, reindeer, wreaths, etc.) can be used as long as poster board is the desired color since seeds do not give complete coverage.

Project #2: Spanish Moss Wreath

Collect Spanish moss and soak in a bleach solution (4 oz. bleach per gallon water) for 10 minutes, then rinse. Suspend wet moss across a string stretched out like a clothesline in a breezy area to dry. You could also purchase pre-treated moss at a garden or craft store. Wrap moss thickly around a styrofoam wreath and secure with glue where necessary. Make a bow out of fabric ribbon or unraveled paper ribbon and secure to the wreath with florist wire. Decorate wreath with dried flowers or plant material. Decorations may be stuck into the moss, glued into place, or attached to the wreath using floral picks. Press a fern pin at the top center of the back of the wreath to hang it up.

Project #3: Sweet Gum Ball Snowman

Collect sweet gum balls (seed pods of *Liquidambar styraciflua*), three of increasing size; small, medium, and large. Glue largest ball to medium-size ball and smallest ball to medium-sized ball to form a snowman shape. Let dry completely and spray the snowman with snow or white spray paint and let dry again. Insert twigs with a dab of glue on the end into a hole on each side of the middle ball to create arms. Glue medium or large seeds on smallest ball for eyes (and mouth if desired). Seeds can also be glued down the front for buttons and a piece of ribbon can be tied around the neck for a scarf. Make a top hat and carrot nose out of construction paper and glue to snowman's head, or create hair using yarn to make a snowlady. A piece of ribbon can be glued to the back to use as a hanger.

Poinsettias continued from page 1...

This is how growers manipulate their poinsettia plants, enabling them to grow fewer varieties and extending the growing season to increase their profits. For example, a variety that flowers on Dec. 12th under natural days could be sold from Thanksgiving (if artificially subjected to long dark periods) through Christmas (if subjected to night interruption lighting).



When caring for your potted poinsettias inside, keep them in a brightly lit area, away from drying or chilly drafts. They prefer daytime temperatures of about 75 to 80°F and a night temperature of 65°F. Water only when the surface of the soil is dry to the touch, removing excess water from the saucer or pot sleeve. Do not apply fertilizer. They will tolerate full sun on a porch or patio but must be protected from frost and freezing temperatures.

The best poinsettias for establishing in the landscape are ones that have been given good lighting and remained green and healthy. Red varieties usually establish better than other colors. Because breeders focus on creating new and exciting colors, patterns, and unique features, the cold hardiness of the plant is usually lost. Purchasing plants that are blooming in mid-November may increase your chances of having them bloom outside before the freezes come next year. Plant your potted poinsettia as soon as danger of frost is past, being sure to choose a bright location that will not receive any artificial light at night. Also, cut off the fading bracts, leaving 4-6 inches of the stem on each branch. Keep the plant mulched and well watered until established. Fertilize monthly from May to September. Discontinue any pruning after September 10th since flower buds will begin to develop in October if conditions (temperature and daylength) are right.

Christmas Cactus



The Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*) is a member of a group sold as holiday cacti that includes the Thanksgiving cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*) and the Easter cactus (*Rhipsalidopsis gaertneri*). All have pendulous stems and are available in a variety of colors including red, purple, oranges, pinks, and creams. When grown under normal day length conditions, Thanksgiving cacti flower near the Thanksgiving holiday approximately one month before the Christmas cacti which flower closer to the Christmas holiday. The Easter cacti typically flower in the spring and sporadically throughout the year. The way to tell them apart when they are not flowering is to look at the stems; Christmas cacti have scalloped stem segments, Thanksgiving cacti have 2-4 pointy teeth along the edges of the stem segments, and Easter cacti have rounded teeth along the segments. All of the holiday cacti have similar cultural requirements.

The Christmas cactus does best in light shade during the growing season from April to September. Starting in mid-winter, the plant can be placed in full sunlight. Water only when the soil surface is dry to the touch. The Christmas cactus is tolerant of dry, slightly under-watered conditions, however, do not let the soil dry out completely. Well-drained soil with good aeration is also a must; use a commercial potting mix for cacti and succulents or mix your own using one part potting soil, two parts peat moss or compost, and one part sharp sand or perlite.

The Christmas cactus flowers best when kept somewhat pot-bound. Repotting is necessary only about once every three years. If your plant tends to dry out and/or wilt frequently, it may be time to repot into a slightly larger container.

For optimal flower bud production, the plant needs night temperatures between 55 and 65°F and long nights (continuous darkness) of thirteen hours or more. If street lights or indoor lighting are disrupting the required dark period, you will need to place the plant in a dark area each night from 5pm to 8am each day starting in mid-October. If you continue this long night treatment for six weeks and then return the plant to its normal spot, flower initiation should occur and buds should appear in about ten weeks from the start of the treatment.

Pruning your Christmas cactus after blooming will encourage the plant to branch out, producing more blooms the following season. To do this, remove a few sections of each stem by pinching them off with your fingers or cutting them with a sharp knife. These sections can be rooted in moist soil to propagate new plants.

When growing a Christmas cactus, the biggest problems you may encounter include root rot (from over-watering) and flower bud drop. The plant may begin to drop unopened flower buds if an excessive number of buds were produced, if a sudden change in temperature or light occurs, or if the growing medium gets too dry.

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2008 Poinsettia Open House and Sale

Thursday, December 11th 8 am to 4 pm

Don't miss the University of Florida poinsettia open house at the Environmental Horticulture Greenhouses on campus in Gainesville.

Check out the newest poinsettia introductions and novel varieties.

Over 100 varieties will be on display of all colors and types.

Be apart of their study by filling out a survey and picking your favorite poinsettias.

Purchase poinsettia varieties that can't be found anywhere else and support the Environmental Horticulture Club students.

No registration required.

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