

The Truth: The Poinsettia Is Not Poisonous

Sugar does not make kids hyperactive and poinsettias are not toxic, according to researchers*. Poinsettias are not meant for human or animal consumption, and an upset stomach can occur if much of the bract is ingested. But a child would have to ingest more than 500 bracts in order to exceed the experimental doses that found no toxicity. People sensitive to latex (the milky fluid in cut poinsettias and other plants) can experience an allergic reaction (rash or skin irritation). But the poinsettia is well documented to be a safe plant and in 1992 was included on the list of houseplants most helpful in removing pollutants from indoor air.

**Studies conducted by the British Medical Journal (12/18/08); Rachel Vreeman, MD, Indiana University School of Medicine; the American Medical Handbook of Poisonous and Injurious Plants; Children's Hospital in Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University; and The Ohio State University in cooperation with the Society of American Florists.*

Will the Real Euphorbia Please Stand Up?

Among the recipients of J.R. Poinsett's poinsettia plants was Philadelphia John Bartram, who gave his plant to Pennsylvania nurseryman Robert Buist. Buist was the first to sell the plant by its botanical name, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, the "most beautiful Euphorbia."

In the Poinsettia's Youth

Native to Central America, the plant flourished in an area of Southern Mexico known as Taxco del Alarcón. The ancient Aztecs called it *cuetlaxochitl* and from its bracts, they extracted a purplish dye for use in fabric and cosmetics. They used the plant's milky white sap (today's latex) to treat fevers.

The Poin


Tapestry™, is one of the Paul Ecke Ranch's Newest Stars for 2010!

Red is the traditional color of poinsettias, but Tapestry™ is anything but traditional. Variegated leaves add a new dimension, combining vibrant green leaves with creamy yellow margins to set off the dark red bracts. Transitional bracts bring in a touch of red, creating a rich tapestry of colors. Courtesy Paul Ecke Ranch.

oinsettia:

An Elegant and Magical Christmas Flower

by Peggi Ridgway



Joel Roberts Poinsett, the United States minister (ambassador) to Mexico from 1837 to 1841, was so taken by the beauty of the poinsettia plant growing wild in Mexico that he brought plants back home with him and sent them to botanical gardens around the world. Since then, the plant with the lovely red bracts that bloom during the Christmas holiday season has been called the Poinsettia after him.

California, with its moist ocean breezes and warm daytime sunshine, embraced Poinsett's treasures. Even today, more than 170 years later, one can see poinsettias in bloom during winter throughout the neighborhoods of Santa Barbara and other coast communities.

So it comes as no surprise that Albert Ecke, his wife and children, found it natural around 1902 to add the poinsettias growing wild on the hillsides around their home near Hollywood to the fruits and vegetables they were selling to retailers and the public. When Albert built the new family home at Eagle Rock, he also began growing poinsettias and chrysanthemums. Albert's son, Paul Ecke (Sr), recalled riding the horse and wagon with his father to the downtown produce market at San Pedro and Ninth streets, where because he had learned to speak English faster than his German father, he negotiated with customers. It was also Paul Ecke Sr who realized that the plant's bracts transformed from green to red at Christmastime, making the poinsettia a natural Christmas flower.

The growth of poinsettia cultivation and sales in the United States is tied inextricably to the Paul Ecke Ranch and its family, which in the 1920s moved the farm to Encinitas. Paul Ecke Sr cultivated his vision of what the flower could become and worked behind the scenes with greenhouse growers, showing them how to reproduce their own plants. His son, Paul Ecke Jr, took it to the next level. His son, Paul Ecke III, today's Paul Ecke Ranch manager, says his father "was the showman who took the poinsettia story to the media – magazines, television and the movie studios." Although the Ecke Ranch's secret grafting techniques became public knowledge just within the last couple decades, Paul Ecke III has taken the company into many other floral avenues, partnerships and cooperative agreements and international recognition. The elegant poinsettia is now available in multiple colors and shapes and is cultivated by several large breeders and nurseries.

Who Was Joel Roberts Poinsett?

Joel Roberts Poinsett (3/2/1779 – 12/12/1851) was born and died in South Carolina, the son of a French physician. He was a physician, botanist and statesman who served in the U.S. House of Representatives, as the fifteenth U.S. Secretary of War (under president Van Buren) and the first Minister (Ambassador) to Mexico. He also co-founded the National Institute for the Promotion of Science and the Useful Arts (predecessor of the Smithsonian Institution).

How to Choose the Right Poinsettia and Care for It Properly

Select the poinsettia with thoroughly colored bracts (no green edges) and strong, healthy stems without sign of breakage or wilting. Ideally, there should not be much pollen on the yellow cluster of flowers in the center of the bracts. Waterlogged soil and a wilting poinsettia is a sign of root rotting, not a good deal. As you transport your plant, put it in a large, spacious shopping bag to protect it from wind and cold.

Place the plant in lots of light (but not direct sunlight) for at least six hours per day. The room temperature should be between 68-70 Fahrenheit degrees. Avoid placing the plant near cold drafts or excessive heat, appliances, fireplaces or ventilating ducts. Before watering, remove the plant from its decorative container. Water it when the soil feels dry to the touch, but don't overwater it and don't let it sit in standing water. Allow it to drain completely. No fertilizer is necessary when blooming.

Our sincere thanks to the Paul Ecke Ranch for much of the source material for this article.