It's almost time to think about holiday plants. And nothing says holidays like the poinsettia, with its yellow flowers in the center of the showy colored bracts, actually modified leaves; this plant will brighten any winter day. The poinsettia is native to Mexico and was named in honor of Joel Robert Poinsett, the first United States Ambassador to Mexico, who first introduced the plant into this country in 1825. The botanical name, Euphorbia Pulcherrima, means very beautiful.

Generally we select poinsettias around the winter holiday season and hope they survive for a few weeks. But if you pick the right plant and care for it properly a poinsettia will retain its beauty for weeks and some varieties will stay attractive for months.

First select plants with green foliage all the way down to the soil line. Look for plants with small green buttons (cyathia) in the center of the colored bracts. These buttons will become the little yellow flowers. Poinsettias are sensitive to low temperatures, exposure to the cold even for a few minutes can damage bracts and leaves. So be sure to protect the plants in between store and home. Place the plant in a room where there is sufficient light to read fine print. Keep the plant away from warm and cold drafts and don't let the plant touch the cold window. Ideally plants should have day time temperatures about 60 to 70 degrees and night
time temperatures of around 55 degrees. High temperatures will shorten the plant's life. You may want to move the plant into a cooler room if necessary at night.

Check the soil daily, water only when the soil is dry. Be sure to punch holes in the foil the plant is wrapped in so that water can drain. Discard any excess water that drains into the saucer. Don't fertilize a poinsettia while it is in bloom.

If you are planning to keep your poinsettia past the holiday season, fertilize with a houseplant fertilizer once a month. You can move your plant outside after all danger of frost is past. Place the plant in a sunny area, where it will get moderate shade in the afternoon. If you prefer you short plants with more flowers pinch out the top ¼ inch on growing shoots. Two or three large fully expanded leaves should be left below each pinch.

If you are interested in getting last year's poinsettia to flower again this year, it is not easy. Place the plant in a room that you can control the amount of light from dusk to dawn; poinsettias need darkness for the bracts to turn color. Start this around the first of October and continue until color shows on the bracts, usually around mid-December. The poinsettia is a short-day or long night plant, and will not re-flower if conditions are not right. Without long nights, this plant will continue to produce leaves and grow but will never flower. Flowers mature in 60 to 85 days depending on varieties, temperature and light intensity. During the day the plant needs as much sunlight as possible. Reduce the amount of fertilizer once you have brought the poinsettia indoors. Growth is slower in the lower light intensity inside the house.

Enjoy your poinsettia this holiday season and year-round as a houseplant. Poinsettias are not poisonous so there is no reason to worry about having this beautiful plant in your home.
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