

## The History of Poinsettias

By Celeste Silling

One of my favorite things about the winter months is the abundance of poinsettia. Poinsettias are perhaps the most popular holiday plant (besides Christmas trees) and for good reason. They're relatively easy to care for and come a wide variety of bright, beautiful colors. But even though they are now ubiquitous with Christmas, the poinsettias had an interesting natural history you might not know about!

The poinsettia (species name *Euphorbia pulcherrima*) is native to Mexico and Guatemala, where they grow wild and enormous. In fact, poinsettias in Mexico can grow to be huge shrubs and even trees 10 to 15 feet in height. It grows in rocky canyons and moist, shady locations.

Long before it was a Christmas plant, Aztecs called the plant Cuetlaxochitl and cultivated it regularly. They used the vibrant bracts to make a red/purple dye and the milky sap to treat fevers. Cuetlaxochitl is said to have been greatly prized by Aztec Kings like Netzahualcyotl and Montezuma. Montezuma is said to have had caravans of Cuetlaxochitl delivered to him in Mexico City, as the plant would not grow naturally in the city's high altitude.

When the Spanish colonized Mexico and introduced Christianity, they adopted the poinsettias into their Christian ceremonies, including nativity processions. They chose the plant because it was brightly colored and bloomed at Christmastime, adding to the festivity of the holiday.

In 1825, poinsettias were first introduced to the United States. The plant was brought by Joel Roberts Poinsett, who was the United States ambassador to Mexico. He had taken some plants from Taxco, Mexico, where they were growing on a hillside and sent them back to his home in South Carolina. The plant was later named after Poinsett and still bears his name in the United States today.

Nowadays, the poinsettia is one of the most popular potted plants in the country. Tens of millions of them are sold every year in the U.S. alone. It has been bred to produce a variety of colors, such as red, pink, white, and variegated. The plant still grows wild around the Mexican cities of Taxco and Cuernavaca, but there might be even more of it up North now.

Poinsettias have many close relatives all over the world, though none are quite as colorful as poinsettias themselves. One native close relative that we have here in Texas is the Paintedleaf, or Fire-on-the-mountain (*Euphorbia cyathophora*). This plant is aptly named for the bright red bases of its leaves. It occurs on roadsides, pinelands, and other disturbed areas.

Now you know the natural history of your poinsettia plant! And if you want to keep it year-round, we live in the right place for it. Here on the Texas coast, we have a temperate climate and low altitude, which is the habitat that poinsettias require. I might try planting my Christmas poinsettia this year and see if it grows into a 15 foot Cuetlaxochitl tree. Wish me luck!

Photo by Stefan Schweihofer- Poinsettias growing wild in the mountains.