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The Henderson County Master Gardeners recently held their end of the year Christmas Party and the main topic of discussion was Poinsettias. So, I thought I would pass the information on to you.

Native to Mexico, the poinsettia originated in a region near the present day city of Taxco. Joel Robert Poinsett, a Southern plantation owner and botanist, was appointed the first united States Ambassador to Mexico (1825 - 1829). While visiting Taxco, he was struck by the beauty of the brilliant red plants he found blooming in the region during December. He had some of the plants sent to his plantation in Greenville, South Carolina, where they flourished in his greenhouse. While the botanical name, Euphorbia pulcherrima, was given by a German taxonomist in 1833, the common name, poinsettia, became and has remained the accepted name in English speaking countries. With over 70 million plants sold nationwide each year, the poinsettia is now the number one flowering potted plant sold in the U. S. A.

The widespread belief that poinsettias are poisonous is a misconception. The safety of poinsettias in the home is demonstrated in scientific studies conducted by Ohio State University in cooperation with the Society of American Florists. The study concluded that no toxicity was evident at experimental ingestion levels far exceeding those likely to occur

in a home environment. In fact, the POISNDEX Information Service, the primary information resource used by most poison control centers, states that a 50-pound child would have to ingest over 500 poinsettia bracts to surpass experimental doses. Yet even at this high level, no toxicity was demonstrated. As with all ornamental plants, the poinsettia is not intended for human or animal consumption.

The poinsettia thrives on indirect, natural daylight and exposure to at least six hours daily is recommended. If direct sun cannot be avoided, diffuse with a light shade or sheer curtain. To prolong the bright color of the poinsettia bracts, daytime temperatures should not exceed 70 degrees F. Avoid placing the plants near drafts, excess heat, or the dry air from appliances, fireplaces, or ventilating ducts.

Poinsettias require moderately moist soil. Water the plants thoroughly when the soil surface feels dry to the touch. Remove the plant from decorative pots or covers, and water enough to completely saturate the soil. Do not allow the poinsettia to sit in any standing water, root rot could result which could kill the plant. It is not necessary to fertilize the poinsettia when it is in bloom.

Since poinsettias are sensitive to cold weather, frost and rain, outside placement during the winter months should be avoided. However, in mild climates, an enclosed patio or entryway may be suitable, provided the night temperatures do not drop below 55° F. Make certain the delicate bracts are well protected from wind and cold rain.

After the holiday, keep the plants in indirect sun and water regularly. Place your plants outdoors, where they can bask in the warmth of spring and summer, after outside night temperatures average 55° F or above. When the bracts age and lose their aesthetic appeal, usually by late March or early April, cut the poinsettia back to about 8 inches in height. By the end of May you should see vigorous new growth. Continue regular watering

during the growth period. Fertilize every 2 to 3 weeks throughout the spring, summer and fall months with a well-balanced, complete fertilizer. Around June 1st, you may transplant your poinsettias into larger pots. Select pots no more than 4 inches larger than the original inner pot. A soil mix with a considerable amount of organic matter, such as peat moss or leaf mold, is highly recommended. If you wish, you may transplant the poinsettias into a well-prepared garden bed. Be sure the planting bed is rich in organic matter and has good drainage. Pruning may be required during the summer to keep plants bushy and compact. Do not prune after September 1st.

WINTER TOLL:

A couple of cold spells have taken their toll on many ornamental landscape plants throughout Henderson County this winter and you can be sure that more are on the way.

It is often difficult to assess exactly how extensive winter damage is on a given plant. Leaves may brown and darken only to leaf anew in the spring time. It is virtually impossible to determine the extent of damage until the growing season arrives. In general, if roots and stems escape severe damage, the plant will regenerate new leaves and survive.

Time is the true test for evaluation of plant damage. I would recommend that homeowners not prune or remove seemingly damaged plants until they have had a chance to respond under good weather conditions. Only then should damaged plants be severely pruned or removed.

In some cases, branch or stem damage may occur until summer when heat stress may cause them to split and die. Pruning the plant just prior to spring growth will stimulate growth and stronger recovery. A severe pruning may be necessary to remove all dead wood and to allow live root systems to sprout a new flush of growth. If the root system has been severely damaged there is little likelihood that the plant can be saved.

Cold damage is more prone to occur when excessive moisture is drawn from the plant tissue in freezing temperatures. Plants which are in dry soils consequently will suffer a greater degree of damage. Therefore, it is important to maintain adequate soil moisture even in the winter time. Mulching shallow rooted plants such as Azaleas with 4 - 6 inches of mulch will also help protect root systems.