

# Poinsettias—Getting Better Than Ever

Poinsettias, Christmas plants? Presently, poinsettias are known and grown primarily as Christmas plants, but they're increasingly being considered as year-round plants, according to Dan Helwig, Mount Joy Vo-Tech horticulture teacher.

While poinsettias are generally considered to be red, Helwig notes there are some white and pink ones. These colors, he thinks, can be adapted to other seasons with the proper industry promotion.

He stated, "The industry is talking about a year-round plant. There is now breeding for a blue bract for July 4."



A Mount Joy Vo-Tech student pots some carnations.

Blue poinsettias? Yes, blue. "Just like yellow carnations years ago, people thought we'd never see them, but they're here today."

The traditional red Christmas poinsettia isn't standing still, either.

This year the Mount Joy Tech School's 400 poinsettias include a few of the new Hegg variety, which has been out only a year or two. But after growing Hegg for only this time, Helwig states: "It's the poinsettia of the future."

Reason? Helwig describes the ideal Christmas poinsettia as follows: dark red leaves at the top, short to medium height, 10 to 12 inches; drak green foliage, large bracts, the larger the better.

It's a description of the new Hegg variety.

In addition, the Hegg can grow at lower temperatures, is hardier and longer lasting in the home, is not as likely to be damaged by temperature changes, such as in transporting the plant from the greenhouse to the home.

The new varieties are bred for lasting quality in the home. Helwig thinks Christmas through Easter is now a reasonable goal for the homeowner's poinsettia.

For those who are purchasing poinsettias now, Helwig offers this advice:

Put the plant in a sunny location, free of cold drafts, but away from TV sets and radiators where it gets too hot.

If the plant is wrapped in foil, punch a hole in the bottom for drainage, check daily for water, strive for a moist soil rather than dry or wet soil.



With beautiful poinsettias grown at the school are Mount Joy Vo-Tech students,

from left, Cindy Moore, David Dagen and Cindy Gable.

Grow your own? Helwig discourages the idea, although he concedes it's possible for the homeowner to be successful. The problem is that it takes a considerable amount of time and patience, as well as the right techniques and plant environment. Homeowners often get poor results, he says.

The Mount Joy School's 400 poinsettias started about September 15 with opening of school with rooted cuttings, which were

potted in various sized pots. Some are "pinched for multiple blooms."

All of them are treated chemically to control height. Helwig has a demonstration at the school, showing degrees of height which result from treated, partially treated and non-treated plants. The non-treated plants are more than two feet tall.

Throughout the growing period, the poinsettias are on a liquid fertilization program.

Beginning October 1, for a period of 40 days, the plants are

shaded and given a short day to initiate the bud and causing the bracts (or leaves next to the flowers) to turn red. While bracts are thought to be flowers by some, they're actually modified leaves; the actual flowers are yellow and very small.

The first color usually appears in the bracts right before Thanksgiving and the plants are ready to move out two or three weeks before Christmas. He school's plants are marketed through the FFA as a fund project.

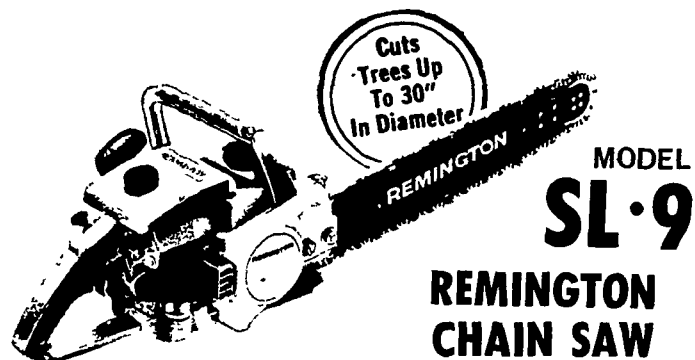


Mount Joy Vo-Tech students water and care for poinsettias.



Vo-tech students learn to root plants in perlite, a synthetic growing medium and soil conditioner, formerly an industrial waste. Perlite clinging to the roots show these carnations are ready for potting.

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