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For the avid gardener

Popular Poinsettia Best Treated as Temporary Houseplant

The poinsettia is far and away the most popular flowering plant for the Christmas season. According to University of Delaware Extension Horticulturist Dr. Charles Dunham, this Central American native is widely cultivated in tropical gardens

throughout the world as an almost perpetually blooming large shrub. People in most parts of the U.S., however, know the poinsettia only as a seasonal potted plant. After 30 years of effort, hybridizers have succeeded in producing varieties with large, colorful bracts

specifically designed for pot culture.

Grown in greenhouses for the Christmas season, the size of these handsome ornamental houseplants is controlled by starting date and growth-retarding chemicals. During July and August each year, new plants are started from cuttings. The earliest cuttings make the largest plants. The most popular size fits a 6-inch pot, but larger and smaller sizes are readily available.

"One of the most spectacular displays is a poinsettia hanging basket," Dunham says. This can be suspended from the ceiling or a wall bracket, or used as a large centerpiece. To create a hanging basket, a florist uses a special pot which is assembled in rings as the cuttings are planted. The plants then grow right out of the sides of the pot. Nine or 10 plants are used in a 10-inch basket. Since each will have four to five blooms, a single container may have 30 to 40 flowers.

When buying poinsettias, the specialist says to choose plants with healthy dark green foliage and fully colored bracts. Unlike

some flowers, poinsettia blossoms won't continue to develop well outside the greenhouse. However, don't be afraid to buy one several weeks before Christmas. A healthy plant will last three weeks in a room with little or no light. Given nine or more hours of natural or bright artificial light, it may last several months.

Poinsettias need water regularly, but let the soil dry out between waterings, Dunham advises. Although they require frequent fertilizer feedings during active growth, none is needed while they're being used for decoration.

Red is still the most popular color, but today poinsettias also come with white and pink bracts.

Every Christmas, reports circulate about the possibility of people — especially children — being poisoned from eating the leaves or flowers of poinsettias. "This fear is totally unsupported by scientific evidence," Dunham says. "Extensive tests have shown there is no basis for reports that this plant contains any toxin which might be harmful if eaten."

Some people try to keep their

poinsettia as a houseplant, hoping it will rebloom the following year. Such efforts result in varying degrees of success, the specialist says. The best way is dry off the plant in May by withholding water. Then cut it back to a few inches from the base, and repot in fresh soil. Keep it outside in a sunny spot for the summer, watering and fertilizing regularly.

Pinch back the shoots several times over the growing season to keep the plant from getting too tall. Bring it inside early in September, place it in a sunny window, and continue watering and fertilizing. Finally, to stimulate flower development, place the plant where it will get uninterrupted darkness each night, starting in mid-October. Do this faithfully until Thanksgiving and, if you've done everything right, you may be rewarded with another round of colorful bracts, though they probably won't be as large or dramatic as they were originally.

"If all this sounds like buying a new poinsettia each year is easier, you're probably right," Dunham says.

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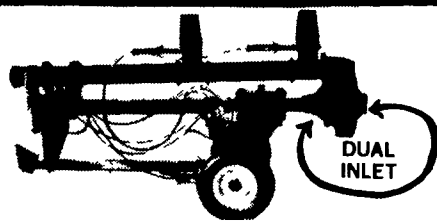
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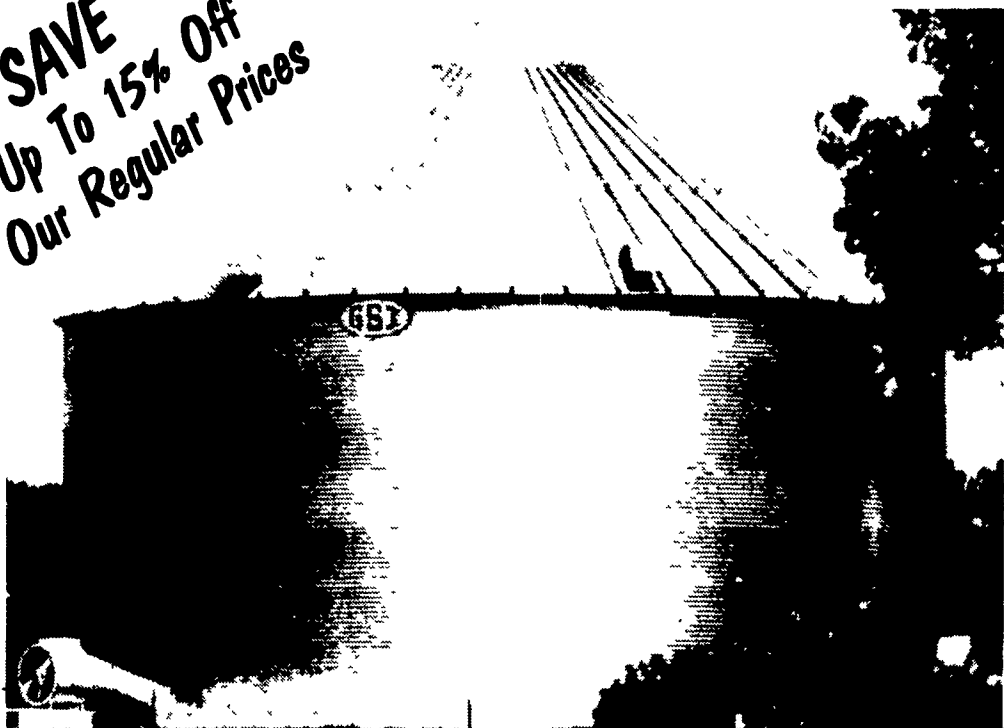
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