

# 'Kissing Plant' Fun And Dangerous

Poinsettias are beautiful. Christmas trees are the essence of Christmas cheer.

But mistletoe is definitely the most fun and most dangerous.

This Christmas Eve I will celebrate my 17th wedding anniversary, a testimony to the long-lasting effects of this magical plant.

The "kissing plant" or mistletoe (*Phoradendron flavescens*) is a dioecious (has male and female plants types) flowering parasitic plant.

The white sticky berries produced by the female plant are consumed by numerous species of birds. These seeds are deposited on the tree, often in bird droppings, from which they germinate and send root-like structures into the tree's vascular system. Mistletoe uses the water of the host tree but produces sufficient food in its leaves for nourishment. All parts of the mistletoe plant are poisonous to humans and should not be consumed.

Put a little mistletoe in your Christmas but be sure not to harm the tree supporting this parasite.

Mexican Flameleaf, Lobster Plant, Painted Leaf, Christmas Flower, and Christmas Star are all recognized common names for the most popular flowering Christmas plant of all times—the poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*).

The story of the poinsettia is a "rags to riches" tale. The poinsettia is a rather common winter flowering shrub in tropical Mexico and Central America. Successful breeding, cultivation and marketing efforts by several prominent plantmen in southern California have made the poinsettia a floral symbol of Christmas the world over. The brightly colored bracts and dark green foliage add beauty and vitality to the festive setting of any home.

The poinsettia bract or leaf is the colorful and decorative portion of the plant. The true flowers are the tiny yellow structures in the center of the bract.

The poinsettia requires long nights and short days for flower initiation. This makes flower induction difficult for the amateur gardener, since as little as 10 foot-candles of light at night will stop or retard flower induction in some cultivars. Poinsettia flowers will usually drop off in two to four weeks but the bracts will remain for several months if plants are properly cared for.

Poinsettias are not poisonous, contrary to much of the publicity they receive.

However, do not consume the leaves since the plant produces a milky latex sap that could cause gastrointestinal upset.

The length of time that poinsettias stay beautiful is directly related to the care plants receive and the environment in which plants are kept. Properly cared for poinsettias may stay in full bloom for more than three months.

## THE PLANT DOCTOR

C. BRUCE WILLIAMS  
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Place your newly acquired plants in a well-lighted area. Poinsettias do best under a moderate to high indoor light intensity. The optimum day

temperature for these beauties ranges from 70 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit but plants prefer cooler night temperatures of 55 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit. Uniformly high indoor temperatures will greatly shorten the time poinsettias remain beautiful.

Proper watering is essential to the long life of your plant. Water poinsettia when the soil mix is dry to the touch. Be sure to apply sufficient water to thoroughly wet all the soil in the container. Plants are often marketed in a watertight plastic or aluminum foil covering. If this is the case, check to be sure your plant has bottom drainage for excess water. If

excess water is not drained from the plant, root and stem rot will greatly shorten the life of your plant.

In eastern North Carolina, poinsettias can easily be moved outside after all danger of frost is passed (usually April 15). Properly fertilized and watered, a poinsettia grown outside will reach a height of 5 to 6 feet and equal width in a single season. However, getting these outdoor-grown behemoths moved inside and induced to flower before the next Christmas is another story altogether.

Send your gardening questions and comments to The Plant Doctor, P.O. Box 109, Bolivia, N.C. 28422.

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