

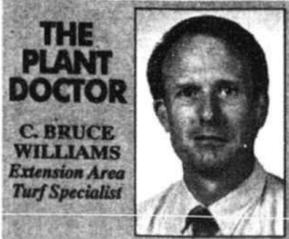
# Deck The Halls With Cuetylaxochitle: Pass The Poinsettias

The Poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) is the most popular flowering Christmas plant in the United States and a native to Mexico. The ancient Aztecs cultivated and prized the wild predecessor (called Cuetylaxochitle) to the modern-day poinsettia and considered the plant to be a symbol of purity. In addition, dyes were produced from the red bracts and medicines from the plant's sap. The story of the poinsettia's rise from weed to the "Queen of Christmas" plants is an American dream.

A southerner, Joel Roberts Poinsett, from Greenville, S.C., is credited with first observing the ornamental potential of the poinsettia. While serving as ambassador to Mexico in the 1820s, Poinsett sent back plants back to friends in South Carolina. The red bracts (leaves) were attractive during the fall, and the plant's popularity quickly grew. Folks began to call this autumn flowering plant "poinsettias" which eventually was modified to the common name "poinsettia".

If Poinsett is the grandfather to the modern poinsettia, then Albert Ecke is the father. Albert Ecke was a southern Californian nurseryman and floriculturist in the early 1900s. Ecke and his son, Paul, grew and developed the first commercial "cut flower" poinsettia operation in southern California at the turn of the century. Paul continued the tradition by conducting extensive research and plant breeding to develop a poinsettia cultivar that could be successfully grown and flowered indoors.

The first poinsettias to be com-



**THE PLANT DOCTOR**  
C. BRUCE WILLIAMS  
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mercially grown and sold for indoor plants occurred in 1920. Now, experts estimate that the 35 acres of greenhouses at the Paul Ecke Ranch in Encinitas, Calif., produce the vegetative cuttings that form the foundation for more than 90 percent of all poinsettias produced in the world. In the floriculture business, Ecke is poinsettias.

Caring for the new poinsettia varieties is easier now than ever before. The poinsettia thrives on a minimum of six hours of bright, natural daylight. However, it may be desirable to pull a light shade or sheer curtain to diffuse direct sun so to avoid fading of the bright red bracts. Maximum bloom life for the poin-

settia can be obtained by carefully managing the temperature around the plant. Ideal conditions for maintaining poinsettia blooms should not exceed 70 degrees during the day nor fall below 65 degrees at night.

Maintaining soil moisture is also very important. Poinsettias do best with moist soil conditions, but plant longevity is drastically reduced if plants are allowed to dry out or overwatered. Soil should be moist to the touch with no excess water allowed to accumulate in the bottom of the pot.

Plants that are watered excessive-

ly will slowly drop their leaves and often contract severe root rot problems. Rapid leaf drop is often caused by chilling injury. This occurs to plants exposed to temperatures below 50 degrees.

Poinsettias are quickly killed by even quick exposure to freezing temperatures. Application of 114 strength soluble plant food in every third or fourth watering will darken the foliage color and encourage healthy new growth.

Contrary to popular belief, the poinsettia is NOT poisonous. Researchers at Ohio State University

found that a 50-pound child would have to ingest more than 500 bracts to surpass experimental doses. Even at this level, no human toxicity was identified. Please note, the poinsettia, like all ornamental plants, is not intended for human or animal consumption, and I suspect that ingestion of the plant would cause some unusual digestive tract disturbances.

Enjoy your Cuetylaxochitle...uh, poinsettia during this special time of the year.

Send your gardening questions or comments to the Plant Doctor, P.O. Box 109, Bolivia NC 28422.

## 'Holiday Magic' At Thalian

"Holiday Magic Spectacular," produced by Landis & Company Theatre of Magic of Philadelphia, comes to Thalian Hall Monday, Dec. 19, for two shows.

In a series of magical vignettes set to holiday music, the winter sprites of Landis & Company combine theatre and large-scale illusion for spectacular effects: a huge rabbit shrinks into a tiny bunny, a young girl floats mid-air from the tip of a broom, and characters appear from thin air.

The company has performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Annenberg Center in Philadelphia and the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. They have appeared on national television as guests on "Christmas at the Pops" with conductor John Williams and the Boston Pops Orchestra.

Tickets for both the 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. shows are \$5 per person, with discounts for members in Thalian Hall. For reservations, call or visit the Center Box Office at Thalian Hall, 310 Chestnut St., Wilmington, 1-800-523-2820.

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