Caring For Poinsettias

The arrival of poinsettias to our local garden centers marks the beginning of the holiday season. If you plan to decorate this year with these wonderfully colorful plants, here are simple steps to help you keep your poinsettias beautiful during these festive times.

Care Instructions

The colorful parts of poinsettias are not petals, but bracts which are otherwise known as modified leaves. The actual flowers are the small, yellow blossoms in the center of these colorful bracts. Thanks to breeding programs at several universities including N.C. State, new cultivars now have bracts that come in various shades of white, pink, peach, and red.

First you want to make sure that you provide your poinsettia with at least six hours of bright, indirect sunlight each day. If the bracts suddenly begin to fade in color then your plant is probably receiving direct sunlight and should be moved to a location where the sunlight is filtered.

Poinsettias do not like excess heat or excess cold so it is vital that they are placed in a location that is not warmer than 70°F or colder than 50°F. Do not put your poinsettias near fireplaces or ventilation ducts. Excess heat and chilling injury can cause leaves to yellow and prematurely drop.

Water poinsettias thoroughly when the soil surface feels dry to the touch. It is essential that you never let the potting soil completely dry out. When watering, take the plant out of its decorative foil and water until excess water drains out of the bottom of the pots drainage holes. Let the pot drain for 15 minutes or so before placing the decorative cover back over the pot. Do not fertilize a poinsettia when it is in bloom. Remember to look in the middle of the colorful bracts for the flowers.

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Most people choose not to grow poinsettias after the holiday season, and the easiest thing to do would be to add it to your compost pile once it starts looking bad. Despite popular belief poinsettias are not poisonous and therefore are safe to compost at the end of the holidays. It is important to be aware that the milky sap that weeps from poinsettia wounds can cause some people to break out in a mild rash.
Winter Pruning Tips

Pruning 101
The best time to prune most trees and shrubs is during the winter because the plants are dormant, there is less risk of disease, it is easier to see what you are pruning, and there will be less plant material to dispose of. Refer to the gray box to the left for specific information about when to prune. Before getting out your pruning tools it is important that you know the desired shape and size of your particular plant before you start cutting away. It is recommended that you maintain the tree or shrub’s natural form when pruning.

Typically you should only remove a maximum of 1/3 of the plant each time you prune; removing more than 1/3 of the foliage can be very stressful to the plant. First prune out any diseased or dead branches. Next remove branches that are crossing or rubbing against each other. Shoots or suckers at the base of the trunk and along the main branches should be removed. The remaining pruning cuts should be made in order to maintain the desired shape and form. Prune back to a bud, a side branch, or the main trunk; do not leave a branch stub because it slows wound closure.

3 Step Pruning Technique
When removing branches larger than 1 ½ inches in diameter use a 3-step cut to prevent the bark from splitting or tearing. For a 3-step cut, make your first cut on the underside of the branch about 15 inches away from the trunk; do not cut all the way through the branch, rather, cut about 1/3 of the way through to prevent your saw from becoming pinched by the weight of the limb. The second cut is made 2-3 inches above your first cut; this cut causes the limb to fall without tearing the trunk bark. The remaining stub can then be cut from the tree right above the branch collar.

Pruning Tools
Most pruning tasks in the landscape can be accomplished using hand pruners, lopping shears, and pruning saws. Before pruning, be sure that all your tools are sharpened and in good working condition. It is also important to sterilize pruning tools between uses with either a 10% bleach solution or 70% rubbing alcohol in order to prevent the spread of plant diseases. Use hand pruners for branches smaller than 1/2 inch, use lopping shears for branches 1/2 – 1 1/2 inches in diameter, and for branches larger than 1 1/2 inches in diameter use a pruning saw.

Common Plants to Prune in February
- Plants that typically flower during the summer (after June 1) can be pruned in the winter.
- Abelia
- Boxwood
- Crape myrtle
- Dwarf Japanese and Chinese hollies
- Fragrant Tea Olive
- Gardenia
- Mohonia
- Nadina
- Rose-of-Sharon
- Spirea
- Sweetshrub

Common Plants to Prune after Flowering
- Plants that typically flower in the spring (before June 1) should be pruned after they bloom.
- Azalea
- Clematis
- Climbing roses
- Dogwood
- Flowering Cherry
- Hydrangea
- Redbud
- Saucer and Star Magnolia
- Witchhazel

We are pleased to be able to provide you this educational information.
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Tree topping is not an accepted pruning practice. Sprouts that grow from these pruning cuts are often weak.