

### The Myth of the Poison Poinsettia

Poinsettias are viewed by many as must-have traditional Christmas season decorations. Some holiday decorators consider them to be as essential to an appropriately adorned home as fresh-cut evergreen boughs, tinsel and ribbon and to not include the colorful plants would be downright tacky. Well-established as Christmas season staples now, poinsettias didn't exist in the United States until the 1800's.



Joel Roberts Poinsett, the first US ambassador to the Republic of Mexico and plant lover and amateur botanist, is credited with introducing his namesake plant to the United States. In December of 1825, during a walk observing native Mexican flora, Mr. Poinsett noticed a beautiful shrub growing along the roadside. He collected cuttings and sent them home for propagation in his South Carolina greenhouse. He shared the plant with friends including renowned botanist John Bartram who introduced it to the nursery trade and its' popularity began to spread. The plant was initially sold under its botanical name *Euphorbia pulcherrima* but it was renamed Poinsettia



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in honor of the man who introduced it to the United States.

Even though poinsettias grown here in the US don't reach the size they can when growing wild in their native Mexico (they can grow into a fairly large shrub or small tree) nor do they live for multiple seasons as a perennial for many folks, poinsettias account for nearly one quarter of all potted plants sold in the US each year. Despite its' widespread popularity and use, the poinsettia has a reputation of being a poisonous plant posing a threat to both humans and animals, especially if leaves or other parts are eaten by children and pets. It's true that sap from poinsettias can cause skin irritation in some as well as an upset stomach and associated symptoms if eaten. However numerous studies have shown exposure to sap and consumption of leaves and other parts don't produce serious toxic side effects.

Poinsettias certainly aren't edible plants and children and pets should be discouraged from eating them, but don't let the fear of poinsettia poisoning keep you from enjoying them in your home. One step you can take to reduce the likelihood of your children eating poinsettia leaves is to provide them free choice access to Christmas cookies and candy. Having a belly full of cookies and candy will likely decrease the odds of them eating potted plants. They may still suffer from a stomach ache and related symptoms, but you can rest easy knowing it's not from plant poisoning.

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