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CHRISTMAS



The Poinsettia

Poinsettia, also known as the Mexican flame leaf (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*), is a spreading, sparsely branched shrub that reaches a height of 4 m in its native Mexico. In December the large leaves at the apex of each branch turn bright crimson and completely overshadow the tiny yellow flowers at their base.

It was in the 1820s that Dr Joel Poinsett discovered the Mexican shrub and by 1829 he was exhibiting it at the Pennsylvania Horticultural Show where it aroused a great deal of interest. In the 1830s it was introduced to Britain, but as a subtropical shrub it could not survive outdoors and it grew too large to be easily accommodated indoors. By 1900 it



was being grown commercially, as a pot plant, but the art of growing short-stemmed poinsettias was fraught with difficulties. Only in the late 1960s, Paul Ecke, a producer in California, began using a dwarfing hormone to keep the plants small.

The Christmas poinsettia trade is now a multi-million-dollar business, made more successful by the fact that few people manage to keep them alive and get them back to flower for the following Christmas. For those who like a challenge, be prepared to cut off the old flower heads and limit watering until April. At this stage, cut the plant back to about 10 cm in height and move it to a warm place. Then it needs a minimum of 14 hours of darkness per day – after which there is at least a chance of a second colourful Christmas.

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