



Trowel Talk!

December, 2010

Poinsettias colour the festive season!

There is no plant more closely associated with the Christmas season than the poinsettia. No doubt this connection has endured because each year, just in time for the festive season, these plants dress themselves up in the colours of Christmas with spectacular red blossoms on bright green foliage.



photo by Fleurette Huneault

The plant's botanical name, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, means "very beautiful." As with many plants in the Euphorbia family, the coloured parts are not flower petals at all but modified leaves called bracts. The flowers are the small almost berry-like structures at the base of the bracts. Two of its relatives are very popular in Ottawa gardens: the perennial cushion spurge (*E. polychroma*) which lights up the early spring garden with its chrome yellow bracts, and the annual snow-on-the-mountain (*E. marginata*) which stands out

in the summer border when its top bracts develop a pure white edge.

Its common name comes from Joel Poinset, an American amateur botanist who "discovered" it growing as a tall woody shrub in its native Mexico. In the 175 years since, a multi-million dollar industry has developed around it. More poinsettias are sold than any other potted plant and almost all of them are sold within the 8 week period preceding December 25.

The poinsettia has been the subject of extensive research and hybridization. In addition to every shade of red from maroon to scarlet to pink, many other colours have been developed like white, yellow and even purple and orange. There are miniature poinsettias and others that have leaves shaped like holly leaves. The limiting factor for the consumer may be what cultivars your local supplier chooses to bring in, but the venturesome buyer can order novelty cultivars online. Although these variations sell well, at least 80% of consumers still opt for standard red.



photo by Fleurette Huneault

The leaves of the poinsettia were once thought to be very poisonous, but much research has shown that this is not so. But, like most Euphorbias, it has a milky

sap which can be irritating to the skin of sensitive individuals.



photo by Fleurette Huneault

When you buy a poinsettia, choose one with well developed colour. A dusting of yellow pollen on the flowers is an indication of a more mature plant that may not last as long. Make sure it is wrapped well for the trip home so it will survive the cold air. Put it in a spot with a lot of light and out of the way of drafts. If the pot is wrapped with decorative foil, either remove it or at least punch holes in the bottom so water can drain properly. Water it when the soil is dry - as much as 2 cups (500 ml) at a time for a 20cm pot. Do not let excess water sit in the saucer. If the leaves look droopy, you are letting it go too long between waterings. Don't fertilize it while it is blooming.

Most poinsettias end up in the compost after the holiday season is over which is a shame. If you continue to care for it as described above, the colour should remain well into March. You can even keep it until next year. If it gets the right combination of conditions and care, it will bloom again in time for next Christmas - but that's another story!

Kelly Noel
Master Gardener

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- trowel_talk_editor@rogers.com

December TO DO List

- Make sure your bird feeders are full.
- Consider a heater for your bird bath to ensure the birds have a supply of fresh water through the winter.
- Check out seed and plant suppliers on the web. You can place an order from their on-line catalogue or request that a copy be mailed to you.
- Dream about next year's garden.

Tip of the Month:

Get creative and put together a seasonal arrangement for your front entrance. There are still many things around the yard that can be harvested to make a great and welcoming decorative piece.



Consider a metal urn or plastic pot as the container since these will be able to hold up to the weather better than ceramic or clay.

Fill the container with sand which can be purchased at a hardware store in the cement section. If you moisten the sand once your arrangement is complete, it will freeze and hold all of the decorative materials in place.

Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton



Where to find us this month for free gardening advice!

ONGOING:

Telephone Help Line: 613-236-0034

- Wednesday and Thursday 1-3 pm

E-mail Help Line: mgoc_helpline@yahoo.ca

- monitored daily
- send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID

CLINICS:

None scheduled until Spring 2011.

SPEAKING EVENTS:

Landscapes & plants that attract birds – January 17, 2011 – 7:30 p.m.

Speaker: David Hinks, Master Gardener

Top Generation Club Hall, 4373 Generation Court, Ramsayville, Ontario

Hosted by the Gloucester Horticultural Society (guests welcome)

Starting plants from seed – January 25, 2011 – 7:30 p.m.

Speaker: Mary Ann Van Berlo, Master Gardener

Tom Brown Arena, 141 Bayview Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario

Hosted by the Ottawa Horticultural Society (guests welcome)

Seed propagation – February 1, 2011 – 7:30 p.m.

Speaker: Fran Dennett, Master Gardener

Old March Town Hall, 821 March Road, Kanata, Ontario

Hosted by the Kanata-March Horticultural Society (guests welcome)



For information on arranging a lecture for your group: 613-836-1491

For more information on Master Gardeners, visit our website:

<http://mgottawa.mgoi.ca>

Cut some boughs from an evergreen such as pine, cedar, fir, or spruce (or a combination of the above for more texture) to act as the filler or base of your arrangement.

Then look around for branches that can add texture and colour. Curly Willow branches look great and add both. Red or yellow twig dog wood branches will also add colour.

Dried seed or flower heads such as those from ornamental grasses, astilbes, hydrangeas, poppies, etc., can be used in their natural dried colour or can be spray-painted to add even more colour.

If you have any oak or beech trees that are still holding their leaves, branches of these rustling leaves add movement and sound.

Our native eastern Holly (*Ilex verticillata*) with its bright red berries add a punch of colour. Barberry branches will also work – just be cautious of the thorns. If you can't find any natural berries, a trip to the dollar store will provide you with artificial ones at a reasonable cost.

Add a big bow and your arrangement is complete. For some extra colour, add a string of mini-lights.

Now you have home-made arrangement that says welcome to my home this holiday season!

I have a rock garden. Last week three of them died.

~Richard Diran



Rain Barrel Truckload Sale

sponsored by
Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton
April 17, 2011
10:00am - 2:00pm
parking lot at Building 72
Arboretum, Central Experimental Farm
(east off the roundabout on Prince of Wales Dr)



These rain barrels hold approximately 220 litres and come fully equipped with a leaf and mosquito filter basket, an overflow adaptor to connect barrels in series, 1.2m of overflow hose and a spigot.

\$55.00 each, taxes included

Reserve a barrel now: www.rainbarrel.ca/ottawacarleton

You can pay online by credit card or debit card.

Or you can order online and pay in CASH on pickup day.

Or call 613-236-0034 if you wish to prepay by cheque or have a volunteer assist you with making an online purchase.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Number of barrels: _____ Colours: _____

Paid by: cash or cheque Total: _____

Give this order form and your cheque (payable to MGOC - NOT post-dated) to any Ottawa-Carleton Master Gardener or call 613-236-0034 for mailing instructions.