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Contributed by Trish Reynolds

THE LEGEND OF THE CHRISTMAS PLANT

We are all terribly busy these days, running around doing our holiday shopping, decorating our homes for visits by family and friends, baking up a storm....and the gals on our Horticulture Committee are no different. I found this article in my In Box from the *Farmer's Almanac* and thought I would share it with all of you!



"How did a tropical plant become an unlikely symbol of the Christmas Holiday? The history of the poinsettia begins with an old Mexican legend, and later, a major American business venture,

Aside from the Christmas tree itself, no plant symbolizes Christmas quite like the poinsettia. More than 2 million of them will be sold this year, making it the largest potted flower crop grown in the US. There are over 100 varieties of poinsettias available in shades of red, pink, white and even

yellow — solids, streaked, marbled, and multicolored. It makes it hard to pick just one. Some have even been treated with dyes, painted or sprayed with glitter.

Native to Mexico, the plant is called 'Flor de la Noche Buena' – Flower of the Holy Night – due to its resemblance to the Star of Bethlehem.

In their native region of southern Mexico, poinsettias flower during the winter season. It is a perennial shrub once considered a weed and will grow 10-16' tall in the wild. The Aztecs used the poinsettia bracts to make a reddish-purple dye for fabrics and used the sap medicinally to control fevers. The colored 'flowers' are actually specialized leaves called



bracts, while the true flowers are inconspicuous beads found in the center of the bracts.



Now the reason blazing red (and now pink, white, yellow, plus combinations of these colors) poinsettias are the Christmas flower in the US is an accidental discovery by Joel Roberts Poinsett (1779-1851), an American statesman and the first US ambassador to Mexico in 1828.

An amateur botanist, Poinsett, saw the red flowers when visiting the Mexican town of Taxco shortly before he was thrown out of the country for trying



to buy Texas from the Mexicans for a million dollars! Poinsett was so impressed by the beauty of these plants he sent cuttings back to his plant near Georgetown, SC, where they were propagated and called the "Mexican Fire Plant". The plant was shared with botanical gardens and growers across the country....soon the plants became popular across the US and were renamed for Mr. Poinsett.

But the reason poinsettias became so popular is due to Paul Ecke and his inventiveness. Ecke, who lived in CA, discovered a technique which caused seedlings to branch, resulting in a fuller plant. He began growing the plant in tens of thousands for the Christmas season, when other flowers were scarce.

To promote poinsettias as a Christmas plant, Ecke sent the crimson-leafed plants to TV stations across the country, including the Tonight Show and Bob Hope's Holiday Specials. The rest is history.

Today, Poinsettias are not only the most popular Christmas plant, but the best-selling potted plant in the US and Canada, contributing over \$250 million to the US economy at the retail level.

For over 150 years, December 12 was considered National Poinsettia Day to honor the day of Poinsett's death in 1851. In 2002, an Act of Congress made it official."

Author: Robin Sweetser, 12-9-21 posting, Farmers' Almanac website.

Who knew??

