

Poinsettia Toss

NOW THAT CHRISTMAS HAS PASSED, WHAT TO DO WITH THIS WINTER ROSE?

I have a limited tolerance for poinsettias since they arrive in the college greenhouse on August 1st as rooted cuttings about 3" tall. After spending four months nurturing them, discussing and demonstrating their culture to students I wish but to see no more of their happy coloured faces. This year was the exception however, when we successfully grew a cultivar called Winter Rose. This double flowered form, I thought looked more 'Christmassy' and hence several made it home. There, they decorate the living room with refined elegance but now that Christmas has past what to do with these charges.

Poinsettias are a seasonal flower that denotes Christmas; however the plants, if I am diligent in their care will maintain their elegance in the coolness of the living room for months. Thus the task of disposing of them becomes doubly difficult when they look like they just came from the greenhouse.

I have a horticultural conscience for all plants; I should re-phrase that, I have a horticultural conscience for all plants except weeds and Norway Maples. Thus it is impossible for me to dispose of a perfectly good plant even though it is out of season. My conscience will not allow me to put them in the compost bin, I once did this with a plant in the dead of winter and crawled out of bed in the middle of the night to retrieve the hapless victim. Needless to say it never recovered and I vowed never again to consign the living to the compost pile.



If you're like me you may wish to keep your poinsettia but unlike me you may wish to keep it for next year. If so realize you are going to be experiencing a more demanding relationship than keeping a hamster. First it is best to keep the plant cool, in moderate to bright light. Water infrequently, keeping the plant on the

dry side. You must do this until late spring when the poinsettia can safely be established in the garden. In the garden prune the plant removing about one third of the growth and fertilizing as you would other annuals. Now the work begins, about the second or third week in August lift the plant from the garden, re-pot and cut back to about two thirds. Water and fertilize lightly and place in a sunny window. About mid to late September poinsettias need a shorter day than night to flower in our region in time for the Christmas season so you will need to provide a space for this to occur. It could be as simple as placing the plant in a cupboard every day at 5:00pm and taking it out at 8:00am every morning. You will need to do this for eight to nine weeks, depending on the cultivar you are working with, without interruption. If you forget, your plant may flower in January, February or...



In the college greenhouse we have technology on our side and of course the students share in this demanding responsibility. For the Winter Rose Poinsettias in the living room they will simply go into the garden in the spring and then intentionally forgotten at first frost. At the first sign of a light frost I will avoid their crispy corpses staring up at me by using the backdoor, they will eventually find themselves on the compost pile in the spring when dead plants are added to the funeral pyre without thought.

Michael Pascoe NDP.,ODH.,CLT.,MSc

Originally published in The London Free Press