

Nothing Trivial about Horticulture
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Often we are bombarded by trivia questions during our daily lives. Games have been developed to quiz the other players and see who can answer the questions the fastest. We listen to radio and watch television and see or hear trivia questions. This week I thought I would ask a few trivia question in my article, so here goes.

What flowering plant is seen everywhere during the holiday season? *Euphorbia pulcherrima* was introduced to the United States in 1825 by Joel Robert Poinsett and is native to southern Mexico. If you still do not know the answer, it is the common poinsettia which is a member of the spurge family. The scientific name literally means “the most beautiful Euphorbia” and is not poisonous, as are other spurges. One such poisonous spurge is the African Milk Tree (*Euphorbia trigona*) which happens to be the world’s most deadly plant and can often be purchased locally as a houseplant. Related to the noxious weed, leafy spurge (*Euphorbia esula*), it can be grown year after year and will even bloom again with proper care.

What is the correct pronunciation of the word poinsettia? The two most common pronunciations are POYN-set-ee-uh and POYN-set-ah; according to most experts either one is correct. The confusion goes back to J. R. Poinsett being French and the addition of the “ia” to make the word more Latin-like. At that time, plant names were Latinized in order to have a more “scientific” sounding name. Now consider English speaking Americans saying the Latinized French word poinsettia. I think you can see where the confusion set in.

Where are the poinsettia flowers? The flowers of poinsettia are not really flowers at all. The red, blue, cream, white and other colors displayed are actually “bracts” which are modified leaves. The flowers of poinsettia are actually the small yellow structures in the center of the blooming area.

Are poinsettias disposable plants? Poinsettias require some special conditions in order to be saved and to bloom next year. Place your plant in a sunny location while blooming, away from radiators and other heat sources. Water it thoroughly whenever the soil is slightly dry to the touch. Do not allow water to accumulate in the saucer as this will cause soggy soil conditions. Fertilize monthly using a dilute solution (half the labeled rate) of houseplant fertilizer. To save your plant for next year, prune heavily once the danger of frost has passed. Place in a spot where it will NOT be exposed to mid-day sun. Repot into a slightly larger container and add fresh potting soil. Bring it back indoors as soon as the nights get colder. Place in total darkness for 14 hours each night, moving it back to its sunny location each day. Once the bracts start turning color you can discontinue the dark treatment.

Following these simple directions, you should be able to enjoy this year’s poinsettia for many years to follow. However, if you are like many other people you can always purchase a new plant each holiday season. The growers really appreciate it if you do that.

Additional information on the history and legends of poinsettias can be found at www.oglevee.com/Articles/Product/PoinsettiaInfo/history.html. Feel free to call on me at 605-394-2188 or e-mail to ricky.abrahamson@sdstate.edu if you have other questions about poinsettias or other horticultural issues.