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Poinsettia

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Have you heard about the large weed that, despite the fact the plants flowers have no colorful petals, has become the most popular blooming plant at Christmas? You have since the plant is poinsettia. How did this plant become such a marketing success and why is Johnny Carson mentioned in the story?

History

A native plant of Mexico, poinsettia's history in the United States begins in the 1800s when the first United States Ambassador to Mexico was appointed by John Quincy Adams. His name was Joel Roberts Poinsett.

A hobby of Poinsetts was to wander the countryside looking for new plants. In 1828, he noticed a shrubby plant with large red leafy bracts growing next to a road. He took cuttings from the plant to grow in his South Carolina greenhouse. This is how poinsettia came by its common name.

Prior to this, poinsettia had been assigned its botanical name by a German botanist Wilenow. He was impressed by the plants color when it grew through a crack in his greenhouse. Wilenow gave the plant the botanical name, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, meaning "very beautiful."

Introduction as a Holiday Plant

How poinsettia became the number one Christmas plant may best be credited to the Paul Ecke

Ranch in California. Poinsettia grew wild in the area near the ranch. The tall, leggy plant bloomed during winter, giving Ecke the idea it would make a good holiday flowering plant. In the early 1920s, Ecke grew field grown plants and marketed them at roadside stands in the Beverly Hills and Hollywood area.

From 1923 to the 1960s, his main business was producing field-grown plants which were spring harvested and shipped by rail to greenhouse growers across the country. Ecke traveled the country, promoting the plant to greenhouse growers, teaching them what he had learned and encouraging them to market the plant as a holiday flower.

In 1963, poinsettia breeding developments yielded the first commercial quality cultivars that grew well as potted plants. At this time, Paul Ecke Jr. joined his father in the business. With formal training in horticulture, he encouraged his dad to move toward greenhouse culture. Ecke Sr. was skeptical but by the mid-1960s most of their operation had changed from field grown to greenhouse grown plants.

With a vision of what the poinsettia could become, Ecke Jr. used the media to promote poinsettias as a necessary part of any holiday experience. The business worked with television, such as The Tonight Show and Bob Hope Christmas Specials, to make certain poinsettias were always a part of holiday sets.

This story goes to show that with vision and a lot of persistence even a weed can become a success. Just be careful about introducing wild plants into the landscape. Some of them can become invasive weeds.

And are poinsettia flowers really without petals? The colorful parts of poinsettias are modified leaf bracts. The yellow button-like, petal-less objects in the center of the leaf bracts are the true flowers. The colorful bracts last longest if the plant is provided bright, but indirect light; the potting mix is kept moist but not saturated; and the plant is located away from air drafts and heat sources.

Sources: University of Illinois Poinsettia History Page and the Paul Ecke Ranch website.