



CROW WING COUNTY MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

Ask the Master Gardener

DECEMBER 2016 COLUMN

Dear Master Gardener:

I'm curious, how did the poinsettia become designated as the Christmas flower?

The plant's association with Christmas began in 16th-century Mexico, where legend tells of a girl, commonly called Pepita, who was too poor to provide a gift for the celebration of Jesus' birthday and was inspired by an angel to gather weeds from the roadside and place them in front of the church altar. Crimson blossoms sprouted from the weeds and became beautiful poinsettias. The star-shaped leaf pattern is said to symbolize the Star of Bethlehem, the red colored leaves symbolize the blood of Christ and the white leaves represent his purity.

Dear Master Gardener:

I would like to purchase a poinsettia this year, what suggestions do you have for picking out a healthy plant and caring for it?

Stores are filling up with numerous cultivars of poinsettia ranging in color from red, white, salmon, plum, red with white splashes, and burgundy, to name a few. With so many choices it may be difficult to select just one!

According to the University of Minnesota, when selecting a poinsettia check a few colored bracts (modified leaves) as well as some of the green leaves to make sure they are free of leaf spots and insects. Before leaving the store, make sure the poinsettia is properly covered using a plastic bag filled with warm air. Chilling injury can occur if exposed to temperatures below 50 degrees.

A poinsettia will remain healthy and colorful longer if placed in a sunny location away from heat vents and cold drafts. The temperature should be around 65 to 70 degrees. The soil should be kept moist but not saturated. Water the plant thoroughly when the soil surface is dry and make sure excess water is removed from the saucer.

Dear Master Gardener:

Are poinsettias poisonous?

There is a common misconception that the poinsettia is highly toxic. This misconception was spread by a 1919 urban legend of a two-year-old child dying after consuming a poinsettia leaf.

To alleviate the public's fear, the Society of American Florists and Ohio State University conducted a scientific investigation into the safety of the poinsettia plant. The Ohio State University research on the poinsettia plant effectively disproved the charge that the poinsettia is harmful to human and animal

health. Of course, the poinsettia, like all ornamental plants, is not intended for human and animal consumption

Dear Master Gardener:

We seem to have fungus gnats or fruit flies. I try to avoid using pesticides, so I was wondering - if I buy a Venus Fly Trap plant, will it eat all the insects?

Carnivorous, or meat-eating plants are very interesting plants that capture and usually digest insects and other small arthropods. Some carnivorous plants that make good houseplants are Venus Fly Trap, Sundew, Butterwort or Pitcher Plant. Venus Fly Traps are very fascinating plants to watch when the leaves snap shut on an unlucky insect that happens across its path. The cup-shaped pitcher plant stores up a sweet smelling juice, which lures unsuspecting insects to their death. The leaf's waxy interior and downward facing hairs keep the insects trapped where they eventually drown. Sundews are mostly short-stemmed plants with a rosette of foliage. Depending on the species, the leaves vary from thread-like to paddle-shaped to nearly round. The leaves are covered with tiny hairs, which exude a clear, sticky fluid. The sticky droplets trap unwary insects or other small creatures that come in contact with it. The struggling victim stimulates the hairs to bend inward, drawing it closer to the leaf where it is digested into plant nutrients. The Butterwort is similar to the Sundew in how it catches its prey; however it consumes only very tiny insects.

Carnivorous plants have very specific growing requirements that are different than most commonly grown houseplants. They are bog plants and need to be kept watered, but not over-watered. They should be planted in pure peat and sand rather than potting soil and should not be fertilized. Good lighting is essential for carnivorous plants. An east or west facing window that receives at least one or two hours of direct sun is ideal.

Dear Master Gardener:

Where does mistletoe grow? How did it become a Christmas tradition to hang it in a doorway?

A popular American Christmas tradition is kissing under the mistletoe. Mistletoe has long been a symbol of love, peace and goodwill. In the 18th century, mistletoe became associated with Christmas from the tradition of hanging mistletoe in one's home to bring good luck and peace to those within the house.

All mistletoe species grow as semi-parasitic plants, living off the tree it attaches itself to. According to the University of Illinois Extension, American mistletoe, *Phoradendron leucarpum*, native to the U.S. can be found growing in the tops of hardwood trees from New Jersey to Florida and west to Texas and Illinois. It is hardy to zone 6. There are other species of mistletoe in western North America that are parasites on conifers. Most mistletoe sold during the holiday season is harvested in Oklahoma and Texas. Unlike the poinsettia, mistletoe is toxic and should not be ingested.

Dear Master Gardener:

We moved to a house that has black walnut trees in the yard and I noticed it is hard to get anything to grow under them. Are there any perennials or annuals that will grow under a black walnut tree?

Black walnut trees, native throughout Minnesota and much of the United States, pose difficult gardening conditions due to the toxic juglone naturally produced by the plants. The following plants will grow under a black walnut tree: hollyhock, Jack-in-the-pulpit, astilbe, wax begonia, pot marigold,

bellflower, glory-of-the-snow, crocus, snowdrop, cranesbill geranium, coral bells, Spanish bluebell, morning glory, bee balm, sundrops, cinnamon fern, garden phlox, lungwort, Siberian squill, lamb's ear, spiderwort, zinnia, pansies, violets, daylilies, hosta, and sedum.

Garden Tips

- Check winter shrub protection. Make sure it is securely in place, keeping out animals or protecting the plants from harsh winter weather and de-icing salt.
- The best way to keep icy sidewalks, steps and driveways safe without damaging nearby plants is to rely primarily on sand or grit rather than de-icing products. If you need to use a de-icing product, mix a small amount into sand. The deicer eventually will run off and accumulate in the soil, the more you use over the winter the more likely that plants will be burned.
- Make cleaning houseplant foliage part of sprucing up your home for the holidays. Clean leaves look best and they capture more light for photosynthesis. Wash the surface and the underside of each leaf with lukewarm water that has a drop or two of mild dishwashing liquid added. Don't use leafshine product, even "natural" ones such as milk or mayonnaise. They leave residue that attracts more dust.
- Don't throw away that holiday tree. Prune off the branches and cover perennial and bulb beds, or leave the tree intact and use it as a windbreak for other plants in the landscape or a little added winter interest, in addition, it provides shelter for birds.
- Be careful when hanging holiday lights on trees and shrubs. Always use lights that are made for outdoor use. Loosely attach the lights to the tree branches and trunks. Remove lights in spring before growth begins.
- Gardening books or gifts make great gifts for people on your gift list. Be sure they are written for northern climates. Other welcome gifts include next year's Minnesota Gardening calendar, a gift certificate for a favorite gardening center, or a membership to the Minnesota State Horticultural Society (includes a *Northern Gardener* magazine) or a membership to the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum.

University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardeners are trained and certified volunteers for the University of Minnesota Extension Service. All information given in this column is based on university research. To ask a question, call the Master Gardener Help Line at 218-454-GROW (4769) and leave a recorded message. A Master Gardener will return your call.

