



**By Roger C. Styer**

# Who Cares for Poinsettias?

**Handling, display, maintenance...pass it on.**

This is the time of the year when every poinsettia grower is breathing a sigh of relief, now that all, or most all, of the crop has been shipped and hopefully sold to consumers who value their beautiful plants. Poinsettias, as everyone knows, have become a traditional Thanksgiving and Christmas fixture throughout the United States, making them the best-selling plant at that time of year. With all of the colors, shapes and sizes, poinsettias brighten up any environment.

Poinsettias are sold in a wide range of markets, big box stores, grocery stores, retail florists, retail greenhouses and even fundraisers. However, sales of poinsettias have been flat or

only slightly increasing over the past few years. This could be due to saturation of the market, as poinsettias are the only real crop for many growers this time of year. And in addition to our own overproduction, we get flooded by product from Canada.

**I have seen many poinsettias displayed outside stores in the warmer parts of the country, left in the sun, exposed to wind and watered overhead at the end of the day. Can you imagine how long those plants will keep their beauty?**

not the easiest things to do. Besides the long crop time, poinsettias can suffer from late-season problems such as bract edge burn, Botrytis on the bracts, stem breakage, cyathia drop and root rot. For wholesale shipping in boxes or on carts, poinsettias should be grown with smaller and more toned bracts than those grown for retail. Typically, wholesale plants are placed in decorative pot covers, dropped into some type of sleeve, and either boxed or stacked on carts. They are then shipped to big box or

grocery stores, where they are divided up for further shipping or display.

Unfortunately, poinsettias may stay boxed for three-plus days and are many times kept in their sleeves until take-home by a consumer. Their post-harvest life is greatly decreased by such handling, resulting in Botrytis on bracts, dropping of bracts or leaves, and a general decline in plant quality. Stores tend to use boxes for displays, often leaving plants in boxes while displaying other plants on top of the boxes. Plants are left in the sleeves so store personnel and consumers can easily pick them up and move them out. Pots are watered over the sleeves, with the pot covers catching the water and increasing the risk of root rots. Also, when plants are watered while still in the sleeves, bracts stay wet and get Botrytis. I have seen many poinsettias displayed outside stores in the warmer parts of the country, left in the sun, exposed to wind and watered overhead at the end of the day. Can you imagine how long those plants will keep their beauty?

The consumer would more readily buy poinsettias in any store if they could see them in all of their beauty, meaning out of the sleeves. The attractive pot covers and even the sleeves help sell the plants, but where are the POP, signage and instructions for their care? Alas, you need to look for the tag to find out how to care for your poinsettia. And that tag is readily covered up by the plant. Consumers typically place plants in the wrong locations, resulting in a quick drop of leaves, damage to bracts or death of the plants. And don't forget about the yearly media mention of how poinsettias are poisonous.

## SOLUTIONS

Every year, I am absolutely dumbfounded by the lack of care during handling, shipping, display and sale of poinsettias in the marketplace. Being a consultant, it is easy to point out the problems, but a good consultant also proposes solutions to those problems. So, here are my solutions to improve the care of poinsettias.

First, growers need to work more closely with store buyers to devise reasonable specifications for what plants should look like and how they

should be shipped. Soft plants do not ship well but toned plants will. Growing taller plants with more bracts is not the answer, nor is growing them at close spacing. Reduce the number of plants produced, as the stores are not obligated to take all of the plants that buyers order. Use merchandisers in the stores, just like in the spring season. Get rid of boxes, and convince the stores to take sleeved plants on carts. Use sleeves that breathe (have lots of air holes). Make sure that at shipment, plants have healthy root systems, no damage to bracts or leaves, and proper moisture. Keep time in transit to an absolute minimum (less than two days), and grow varieties that will ship better (dark-leaf). There is great research out of the University of Florida from Terril Nell and Jim Barrett about post-harvest life of all the varieties. And how about an information sheet to store personnel on how to care for the poinsettias once they receive them?

Second, stores need to unsleeve plants immediately when received and display them properly (no drafts or full sun, please!). Consumers will stop in their tracks when poinsettias are displayed en masse in an attractive way. Make it easy for them to pick out their plants and sleeve them themselves. Rework displays every day, removing damaged plants and replacing them with fresh ones. Categorize poinsettia displays with fresh fruit and vegetable displays; they are just as perishable, if not more.

And finally, how about having more information for the consumer on how to care for their poinsettias? We are doing so much with POP and branding during the spring (and even with pansies in the fall), but we neglect poinsettias. Tell the consumer to punch holes in the pot covers and place plants in saucers to water them (maybe even sell them the saucers with their plants). Or better yet, how about getting rid of pot covers all together and using more colored pots? **GPN**

**Dr. Roger C. Styer is president of Styer's Horticultural Consulting, Inc., Batavia, Ill. He can be reached by phone at (630) 208-0542, fax at (630) 208-0966 or E-mail at carleton@voyager.net.**