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**Keep Your Poinsettia Growing Year-Round**

Poinsettias are always thought of as Christmas plants because of their brilliant red color. For that reason, they are very common gifts during the holiday season. But did you know you can enjoy your poinsettias for years if you take care of them properly? Most people, however, don't know how to care for these plants, so they often go into the trash soon after the Christmas wrapping.

Keeping a poinsettia alive is actually the ‘art’ of knowing something about the plant in order to make it bloom again according to horticulturists with the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences. For instance, the poinsettia should not be planted outdoors in Georgia due to our chilly winter weather.

UGA Horticulturists recommend these tips for growing a healthy plant:

\* Place the plant near a sunny window. But make sure it's not close to a door or heat vent where drafts of either cool or warm air may reach the plant. Keep the temperature as close to 70 degrees as possible - 50 degrees is too cold.

\* When the leaves begin to wilt, let the container dry out by watering it less. This will cause the plant to fall into a semi-dormant stage. The leaves will shrivel and drop off.

\* By late March or early April, repot the plant in a larger container. Cut it back to 2 to 4 inches above the soil level and begin to water it more often. Water the plant whenever the top layer of soil begins to dry out. If the soil feels dry at the two inch depth, it’s time to water.

\* When the new growth begins, apply a soluble fertilizer every other week. After the plant grows 4 to 6 inches, pinch back the shoot tips to allow it to branch. Poinsettias need to be pinched at least twice during the season.

\* To bloom, the plant needs eight to ten weeks of short days. Each short day should include no more than 12 hours of sunlight. Starting Oct. 1, keep the plant in complete darkness at night for 14 continuous hours. If it's indoors, move it to a dark room or

closet or cover it every night with a large box. Any type of light, such as a porch light or even a flashlight, can disturb the blooming process.

The coloring of the bracts is related to the flowering process, which happens at the same time. The bracts come in many colors, from the traditional red to shades of yellow, pink or white. They may even be speckled or marbled in certain cultivars.

Poinsettias are commercially grown in greenhouses where the temperatures and amount of sunlight are closely monitored. It's important to try to match these same conditions when growing your own plant.

The proper care of a poinsettia can provide a beautiful arrangement not only during the holidays but throughout the year.

For more information on caring for poinsettias, contact the Bartow County Extension Service office at 770-387-5142 or uge1015@uga.edu.