Did You Know?

Poinsettias have their wonderfully full and conveniently sized stature thanks to Agricultural Research Service scientists.

Poinsettias are America's number-one holiday plant, with more than 80 million sold during the 6-week season.

In its native Mexico, the poinsettia grows up to 8 feet tall. In the 1990s, scientists at the ARS Beltsville Agricultural Research Center found that a phytoplasma—a bacterialike organism—acts as a dwarfing agent, allowing the common holiday plant to stay at a comparatively dainty 18 inches. This phytoplasma triggers a hormonal imbalance that instructs the plant to grow outward, rather than up like a tree. This "free-branching" phenomenon also produces more of the brilliant-red, leaflike bracts favored by many consumers.

ARS research also targeted the plant's natural propensity to keep its leaves and color for only a few days. The scientists found some poinsettias that were genetically disposed to last longer and used those plants to develop several species that had staying power.

The poinsettia, a contemporary symbol of Christmas in many parts of the world, was introduced to the United States and named after Joel Robert Poinsett in 1825.

Poinsett was serving as the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico when he saw the plant growing in the hillsides of Taxco, a small town in southern Mexico, where the plant is native.

Taxco was called "Cuetlaxochitl" by the Aztecs, who prized poinsettias and considered them a symbol of purity because of their brilliant red color.

The Aztecs made a reddish-purple dye from the colored "flowers," which are actually modified leaves called "bracts." They also made a medicine against fevers from the latex sap of the plant.

In the 1600s, Franciscan priests came to Taxco and began using poinsettias in the Fiesta of Santa Pesebre, which is a nativity procession. The appearance of the red bracts coincided with the time of the procession.

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