

GET GROWING

Time to keep poinsettias in the dark

To get them to bloom this holiday season, they need to be out of the light at least 12 hours a day

By VIRGINIA BODRATE

Just as the lily has become a symbol of the Easter season, and roses the messenger of St. Valentine, so the poinsettia has found favor as the official flower of Christmas.

It was introduced into the United States in 1828 by our then-Minister of Mexico, Joel Poinsett. The plant, native to that country, has found an enthusiastic and worldwide acceptance because of its beauty and ease of cultivation.

If you have been nurturing last year's Christmas poinsettia in anticipation of bringing it into bloom this

coming holiday season, you have now reached an important milestone. Following a few simple rules will reward you with a generous display of bracts (leaves), varying in color from ivory to brilliant red — colors that dazzle the eye and add much to the holiday season.

DID YOU PRUNE?

You should have pruned your plant in late August or early September to stimulate flower development, and should then have brought it indoors.

Temperature is critical. Poinsettias, although hardy, dislike drafts and resent temperatures below 65 degrees. During early fall, however, when we experience warm and sunny days, the plant will benefit from an outdoor "airing" — several hours if possible.

A generous drinker, it needs to be well watered, but not sodden. Feed it twice

monthly with a well-balanced commercial plant food, following the manufacturer's directions. If possible, try to increase the humidity during late October, November and December.

Equally important is that you respect the plant's "short day" preference during the flowering season. It must have uninterrupted "rest," devoid of light for at least 12 hours daily. Early in the evening put it to bed in a closed closet or a large cardboard box, or make a tent with a dark cloth over the top portion of the plant. This practice must be faithfully followed for six weeks between early October and late November.

LAST PRECAUTION

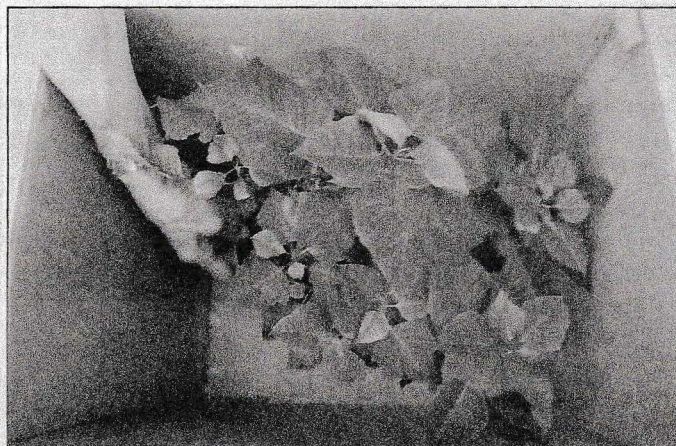
One last precaution: Mealy bugs are one of the few pests that bother poinsettias. If these little fuzzy white insects are present, remove them with a cotton swab

dipped in alcohol. Avoid using insect spray if possible.

Barring any unforeseen occurrence, if you follow this advice you more than likely will be able to celebrate all the season's festivities along with a newly bloomed plant.



Early in the evening, put your poinsettia to bed in a large cardboard box, below, or make a tent with a dark cloth over the top portion of the plant, as Virginia Bodrate is doing here.



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE PHOTOS/JAN SOMMA-HAMMEL