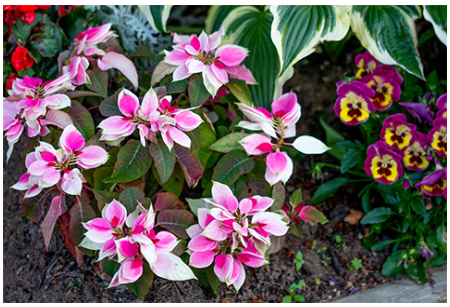
GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

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Poinsettias as Winter Houseplants

Lowell Halvorson



Let me challenge you a little bit. What if … I wanted to retail poinsettias as winter houseplants? That's my SKU. I'm not asking the consumer to keep the plant and rebloom it next year—just to enjoy it as long-lasting seasonal decor, like autumn mums or spring hydrangeas.

Princettias easily last in color through spring and early summer. Dropped in the garden as an exotic annual, they take on a personality of their own. Pure White sat among the heuchera on June 1, whereas Hot Pink was found with the hostas.

Poinsettias have this deep-seated desire to move outside the Christmas market, with orange for Thanksgiving and pinks for Valentine's Day. However, the economics of poinsettias grind against the gears. Points are slow growing, but they retail when there are very few alternatives. They succeed because they keep the lights on and the staff busy just as much as pleasing the customer.

However, if we shift the calendar, poinsettias come up against established crops that grow faster and cheaper. The trick is to shift sideways. To move the crop into another thriving winter market.

The best place to see the Princettia lineup, especially Sparkling Rosé, is the Heimos trial video Suntory shot a couple of years ago. Each color is laid out as a crop on the floor. Sparkling Rouge shows up about half way through.

That would be houseplants. It's not hard because the strategy calls for growing 4-in. and 6-in. poinsettias. It's not easy, though, because it requires upgrading the soil from a gift grade to a fortified blend that can support houseplants. Shaping is also different. The final product should be bushy and colorful with multiple blooms despite its small size. In short, aim for an attractive houseplant, not a disposable display.

Possible choices

Not all cultivars are up to this task. Material with the most potential comes out of the novelty poinsettias because they sell well early, which requires durability. Prime sales occur right after Thanksgiving, so plants need good holding qualities to go the distance up to Christmas. They often last a long time afterward with a bit of TLC.



Princettia series—Many houseplant features emerge straight out of the cutting: dense branching and heavy color with very small bracts and lots of them. Habit is very compact, so fewer PGRs are required, and maybe not even a pinch, depending on pot size. For larger pots, stick cuttings earlier or switch to the Princettia Queen series.

Christmas Rose is very durable with a very long color lifespan. They last well into the summer and will lose their leaves before their bracts. Sprigs make interesting table decorations placed into artisanal bottles.

New color bracts emerge throughout the winter. Cyathia drop, stems extend and the product becomes less Christmas and more euphorbia in the home. Once frost is past, the poinsettia can be dropped into a garden bed as an exotic spring annual. Plant it in the shade, among the hostas (the ones I plant in direct sun always fry). Remember, their original job was to survive on whatever winter sunlight spilled into the house.

Clean, vibrant color is Princettia's biggest draw. Pure White is a paper white. Some of the pinks are neon highlighter. Sparkling Rosé does a funny variegation dance between lightly touched early color bracts and the heavily mottled later ones. I've never seen a plant do what Sparkling Rosé does, so it's worth a look.

Winter Rose—Introduced in the late 1990s, this cultivar has crinkly-curly bracts that scrunch into rose-like shapes. After a decades-long development cycle, its introduction marked the debut of the curly-bract category, along with one of the longest color lifespans among the poinsettias.

I bought my Winter Rose at Ganim's (Fairfield, Connecticut) and kept it as a houseplant well into April. In the garden, the roses hung on until midsummer and new color even emerged from the existing stems. The plant has a very V-shaped habit, more upright than outward, with strong, thick stems and a great internal structure. Use this cultivar for larger houseplant SKUs. Dümmen Orange maintains the genetics these days, and they have white and pink varieties.

Italian breeder Lazzeri has also taken up the challenge. Their beautiful Roccostar Red and Roccostar White winter rose-type varieties have more blooms, with strong yellow centers and more scrunch in the bracts.



Tapestry—Bred by Ecke Ranch as a significant upgrade to the existing Holly Point, this cultivar has a deep history stretching back to the Johnny Carson show. Tapestry's signature move is stable yellow-green variegation underneath cherry red bracts. It's naturally tight and compact, so it works best in the 4- and 6-in. pot sizes—a good candidate for an affordable houseplant.

Tapestry's selling point is contrast between the variegated leaves, cherry red bracts and the transition between the two.

Tapestry also has a long lifespan that reaches the spring annual garden if repotted. This practice underscores that key feature that condemns poinsettias to the disposable decor sector. Soil in gift and decor products assumes no viable lifespan after the sale. A houseplant won't accept that. **GT**

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