



## The Poinsettia and the Legend of Pepita

### Description

# How the Mexican *flore de nochebuena* became a symbol of Christmas

By **Michael Walsh**

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When one conjures images of the **Holiday Season**, several scenes come to mind: Christmas trees adorned with coloured lights, gift-wrapped presents, doorways sporting wreaths sporting small red berries, traditional family dinners and side tables displaying the beautiful red hues from various poinsettia plants.

During the months of November and December, poinsettias are ubiquitous. They line the floors of our grocery stores, and, coupled with their low cost, one tends to regard these plants as disposal seasonal items.



Image: Illustration of Poinsettia Pulcherrima  
(*Euphorbia pulcherrima* Willd. ex Klotzsch) 1880  
(Creative Commons)

This brings us to the question – what do we know about these plants? The short answer is our parents and grandparents have erroneously taught us that poinsettias are toxic to all young children and household pets. Before elaborating on that point, let us step back and gain a wider understanding of how this plant entered the floral industry, became a commodity and eventually entered our homes.

The **Poinsettia**, or **Christmas Flower**, is botanically known as *Euphorbia pulcherrima* (“very beautiful”) and is a member of the *Euphorbiaceae* family, which includes the rubber tree. As such, both plants contain a similar milky latex. Its native habitat is a limited area of **Mexico** comprising today’s town of **Taxco**, where they grow as shrubs often reaching ten feet in height.

In the 1300s, the **Aztecs** named these plants “*Cuetlaxochitl*,” and used their sap for medical purposes and their brightly coloured leaves (called bracts) to make purple and red dyes. Highly prized by the Aztec kings, thousands of these plants were transported to the capital city of **Teotihuacan**.

The Aztec nation prospered until 1531, when **Cortés**, under the direction of the Spanish crown, invaded the capital leading to the nation’s downfall and Spanish control of New Spain – today’s Mexican nation. (Interestingly, to this day, the Spanish crown has not apologized for atrocities committed during this invasion.)



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Franciscan priests and missionaries soon followed and purged all aspects of previous religious worship – except for the Poinsettia.

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They incorporated the plant into their Christmas rituals under the name *flore de nochebuena* (“flower of the Holy Night”) for its annual blooms during the Christmas period. (Actually, these plants are photoperiodic – blooming in response to short day lengths).



Joel Roberts Poinsett – Image: [Charles Fenderich \(1805-1887\)](#), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

At this point, our story moves ahead to the 1820s with the introduction of **Joel Roberts Poinsett** – United States Special Envoy to Mexico. Although his diplomatic career was far from stellar, he is credited (although some dispute this) as the first person to collect living poinsettia material. These were shipped to Philadelphia, where they were cultivated in the garden of the Bartram family. Interestingly, the garden still exists at 54th St. and Lindbergh Boulevard.

In 1836, the botanist **Robert Graham** used the taxonomic classification as “Poinsettia” in honour of Joel Poinsett although, in the United States, the plant became known as the “Mexican Flame Thrower” or “Painted Leaf.”



There is also an interesting connection between Poinsett and today's Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C. As a founding member of the National Institution for the Promotion of Science, Poinsett argued for the creation of a national museum.

Upon Poinsett's death on December 12, 1851, the United States Congress declared that date "**National Poinsettia Day.**"

Today, poinsettia production is a huge industry, with over three hundred varieties (cultivars). Dümme Orange produces eighty percent of the world's poinsettias from their Paul Ecke Ranch located in Encinitas, California. Large numbers of these cultivars have an International Patent Classification code. (Many of us have noticed a "propagation prohibited" label affixed to retail plants.)

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There is, however, a huge hurdle that United States growers face – that the plants are not children or pet friendly. This common belief is reflected in a fifty percent decrease in pots sold between 2005 and 2017.

Much like the belief that bats entangle themselves into one's hair – because this has occurred to at least one close relative – let us examine how poinsettias obtained a bad reputation.

It appears that the seminal report described a two-year-old child of an army officer stationed in Hawaii. In 1919, the child died of poisoning – although tragic, the cause of death was incorrectly attributed to poinsettia ingestion.



Image: Commonwealth Stamps

Going forward, many studies have tried to dispel these erroneous findings.

More specifically, a study at Ohio State University reported that a healthy fifty-pound child could ingest 500 poinsettia bracts (leaves) and suffer a mild tummy ache. This is something I would not recommend.

Other, more controlled studies focus on the plant's terpenes (aromatic compounds) that also occur in rubber latex. Studies show that forty percent of individuals with latex allergies develop a cross-sensitivity to the plant. More



~~importantly, there are rare reports of anaphylactic shock (a medical emergency) in infants with both atopic eczema (characterized by dry, itchy and inflamed skin) and latex allergies when exposed to these plants.~~

The **American Journal of Emergency Medicine** analyzed 22,793 cases of accidental poinsettia exposure finding no morbidity and 96 percent of patients not requiring health care treatment. In addition, similar findings are reported in various veterinary medical journals.

However, other poison control centres have reported mouth lesions and gastrointestinal distress in infants chewing the plant's leaves.

'... one should regard these plants as potential allergens and not toxins. Using a common sense approach, one can showcase their exceptional beauty during the holiday season.'

In short, not discounting the rare cases of anaphylactic shocks in infants with pre-existing conditions, it appears that the plant is part of a (long) list of "Christmas allergens". Reported allergens include Christmas trees, Christmas cacti, perfumed candles, typical holiday food and even gifts such as mobile phones and laptops. With that in mind, one should regard these plants as potential allergens and not toxins. Using a common sense approach, one can showcase their exceptional beauty during the holiday season.

With that information in mind – I wish you all a healthy and prosperous Holiday Season and leave you with the ageless story about the poinsettia and the magic of Christmas.





Poinsettia greenhouse – Image: [The Sherbrooke Record](#) (Gordon Lambie)

## The Legend of Pepita

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Pepita. She was very poor, but she had a kind heart.

One December, everyone in her village was heading to the Christmas Eve service. The Christmas Eve service was a big, colourful, and lavish event. People would dress up in their very best clothes and bring expensive gifts for baby Jesus.

Some villagers used this as an opportunity to show how very fine their clothes were and how much they could afford to give, but others – like Pepita – were genuinely pious. Sadly, the people with the fancy clothes and gaudy gifts could be quite judgemental about what others had to offer.

As Pepita headed to the chapel she was very sad. She was walking barefoot because she could not even afford shoes – let alone a present for baby Jesus. Her cousin, Pedro, tried to console her.



Image: Mystic Stamp Company

“It does not matter how big your gift is”, he said, “the important thing is that you love the baby Jesus. He will like any gift from someone who loves him, however small! And if you have no physical gift, your presence can be the gift!”

But Pepita could not bring herself to attend the service with no gift, so she bent to pick some weeds from the side of the road. It was winter, so they weren’t even flowering, but they still had some leaves. “Better than nothing”, she said to herself.

Pepita got to the chapel, and all the rich people in their finery scoffed at her bare feet, ragged clothes and bundle of weeds. But when she laid her offering at the Nativity scene, those humble weeds suddenly transformed. Those drab little weeds doubled in size and turned a bright, living red which outshone all the other gifts. Tiny white flowers sparkled in their centre.

Everyone in the chapel was astonished. But the priest knew that they had witnessed both a miracle. Coming to inspect the plant, he interpreted what they had seen. The red leaves, he told the congregation, represented the blood of Christ. The white flowers represented the purity of the Virgin Mary. And the shape in which the leaves were arranged represented the Star of Bethlehem. These flowers, he said, were “*Flores de Noche Buena*” – “Flowers of the Holy Night”.



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Feature image: *Poinsettia varieties*, by [Andy Mabbett](#), [CC BY-SA 3.0](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

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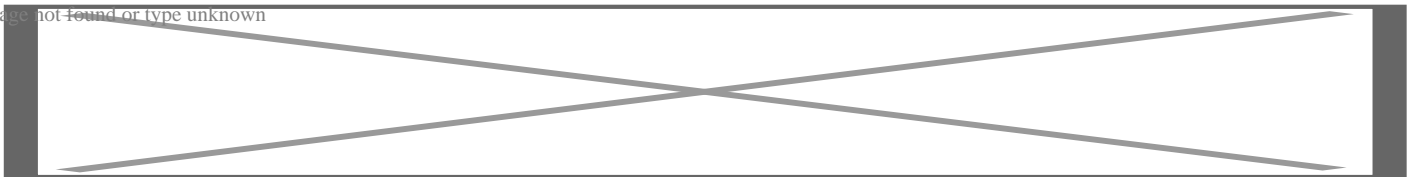
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**Michael Walsh** is a long-time Westmount resident. He is happily retired from nearly four decades in the field of higher education technology. A “professional student” by nature, his academic training, and publishing, include statistical methodology, mycology and animal psychology. During this period, he was also an officer in the Canadian Armed Forces. Prior to moving to Montreal, he was contracted by the Ontario Ministry of Education evaluating bilingual primary and secondary school programs. Today, he enjoys spending time with his (huge) Saint Bernard while discovering the city’s past and sharing stories of the majestic trees that grace the parks and streets. He can be contacted at [michaelld2003@hotmail.com](#) or through his blog [Westmount Overlooked](#)

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