

This Day in History... December 12, 2002

Happy National Poinsettia Day!

On December 12, 2002, the US first celebrated National Poinsettia Day, honoring two of the men who helped make these festive plants popular in the US – Joel Roberts Poinsett and Paul Ecke Jr.

Native to Mexico, the Aztecs called poinsettias *Cuetlaxochitl*, which means “flower that withers, mortal flower that perishes like all that is pure.” According to Aztec tradition, these plants were a gift from the gods and their blood red coloring was to be a reminder of the sacrifices the gods made to create the universe.

Poinsettias were first associated with Christmas in the 16th century. One legend tells of a young girl too poor to buy a gift for Jesus’s birthday. She collected weeds and formed them into a bouquet. When she placed them before the crèche, they transformed into the beautiful red blooms of the poinsettia. The people of Mexico called these plants *Flor de Noche Buena*, meaning Christmas Eve Flower.



In Mexico, wild poinsettia shrubs can reach 15 feet tall.

In another legend, Franciscan friars decorated a nativity scene for Christmas. During their mass, the Star of Bethlehem passed overhead and the plants changed from green to red. From then on, the red plants became a symbol of the blood of Christ and were closely associated with Christmas.

Up until the 1800s, poinsettias weren’t found in the US. The man responsible for bringing these plants to America was Joel Roberts Poinsett (1799-1851). Although he had graduated from medical school, Poinsett’s true love was botany and traveling to exotic locations. Poinsett toured Europe extensively, as well as the most remote regions of Russia. Upon his return to the US, Poinsett was appointed to serve as the nation’s first ambassador to Mexico.

While in Mexico in 1828, Poinsett discovered a tree-like plant with brilliant red leaves. He sent some plants to his home in South Carolina, where they were propagated and given to friends and local botanical gardens. Before long, the plant became widely known by a new name – “poinsettia.”



Poinsettias are the highest-selling potted flowering plants in the US.

The Tonight Show and other programs to talk about poinsettias.

For decades, the Ecke family dominated the poinsettia market because their grafting technique produced the most attractive plants. Then in the late



If properly cared for, a poinsettia can last for six months or more. In Martinique, they're called six mois beau (six months of beauty).

While Poinsett had introduced the plant to America, it was another family who would help make poinsettias a Christmas season staple – the Ecke family. After emigrating from Germany in 1900, Albert Ecke opened a dairy and orchard before becoming interested in poinsettias. He started selling them on a street stand and instilled an interest in the plant in his son Paul.

When he grew older, Paul developed a grafting technique that produced a fuller plant (poinsettias in the wild look more like weeds). In turn, his son, Paul Jr., also took an interest in the plant. Paul Jr. changed how the plants were sent – instead of sending mature plants by train, he sent cuttings by plane. He also gave free plants to TV stations to decorate their sets between Thanksgiving and Christmas, helping to promote them in the eyes of the public. Paul Jr. even appeared as a guest on

the 1980s, a botanist discovered their technique and published it, so many other companies could grow comparable plants. But the Ecke family remained one of the largest sellers of poinsettias into the 2000s. Over the years, botanists have also found ways to grow poinsettias in over 100 colors. The red blooms of the plants are actually leaves and the flowers are the small knobs of yellow, red and green in the center.

In 2002, the US House of Representatives passed a bill establishing December 12 as National Poinsettia Day. The day was selected because it’s the date of Joel Roberts Poinsett’s death. December 12 is also the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico.



Stamp from the first US se-tenant issued in 1964



Imperforate 2013 Poinsettia Stamp



The poinsettia’s botanical name, Euphorbia pulcherrima, means “the most beautiful Euphorbia.”

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