

## History of the Poinsettia

The poinsettia is a native plant of Mexico and originated in a rather limited region near present day Taxco. Long before the arrival of Europeans, the Aztecs of Central Mexico cultivated the plant and called it Cuetlaxochitl. Because of its brilliant color, the poinsettia was a symbol of purity to the Indians. It was highly prized by Kings Montezuma and Netzahualcoyoti, but could not be grown in their capital, which is now Mexico City, because of the high altitude climate. The Aztecs also had practical uses for the plant. They made a reddish-purple dye out of the bracts and a medicine for fever from the plants latex.

**The legend of the poinsettia** dates back to a Christmas Eve long ago...

*There was a little Mexican girl named Pepita who was very sad. Pepita wanted more than anything to give a fine present to the Christ Child at the church service that evening. She was very poor and had no gift to present. As Pepita walked sorrowfully to church with her cousin, Pedro, he tried to console her. "Pepita," he said, "I am certain that even the most humble gift, given in love, will be acceptable to His eyes."*

*Pepita gathered a bouquet of common weeds from the roadside and entered the church. As she approached the altar, her spirits lifted. She forgot the humbleness of her gift as she placed it tenderly at the feet of the Christ Child, and then there was a miracle! Pepita's ordinary weeds burst into brilliant red blooms! They were called Flores de Noche Buena, Flowers of the Holy Night.*

Joel Roberts, a Southern plantation owner and botanist, was appointed the first United States Ambassador to Mexico (1825-1829). While visiting Taxco, he was impressed with the brilliant red flowers he found blooming during December. He had some of the plants sent to his home in Greenville, South Carolina. They did well in his greenhouse and he distributed plants to his horticultural friends. The botanical name, *Euphorbia pulcherima*, had already been given by a German taxonomist in 1833. The common name, poinsettia, however, has remained the accepted name in English speaking countries.

Today, the poinsettia is not only the most popular Christmas holiday plant, but is the number one flowering potted plant in the United States.