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The Colorful Past of Poinsettias

— by John Peter Thompson

The holidays are here again, and among the icons of our celebrations is the beautiful poinsettia from south of the border. The history of this popular plant is indeed colorful, according to the University of Illinois, from which we obtain the following facts.

As early as the 14th century, the Aztecs used the sap as medicine, and made a red dye from the flowers (actually modified leaves called “bracts”). Moctezuma, one of the last of the Aztec kings, reportedly had poinsettias brought into (what is now) Mexico City by caravan because the plants didn’t grow well in the high altitude.

The botanical name was assigned to the poinsettia by the German botanist, Wilenow. Dazzled by its color, he named the plant, *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, meaning “very beautiful.” William Prescott, a historian and horticulturist, was asked to come up with a more user-friendly name as the poinsettia became more popular. At that time Mr. Prescott had just published a book called *The Conquest of Mexico*, in which he detailed Joel Poinsett’s discovery of the plant. So, Prescott named the plant “poinsettia” in honor of Joel Poinsett’s discovery (missing the golden opportunity to name it the Prescottia). Completely irrelevant to appreciating the plant, but interesting to a few none the less, Joel Roberts Poinsett was the first United States Ambassador to Mexico, being appointed by President Andrew Jackson in the 1820’s. At the time of his appointment, Mexico was involved in a civil war. Because of his interest in botany he introduced the American elm into Mexico. During his stay in Mexico he wandered the countryside looking for new plant species. In 1828 he found a beautiful shrub with large red flowers growing next to a road. He took cuttings from the plant and brought them back to his greenhouse in South Carolina. Even though Poinsett had an outstanding career as a United States Congressman, as an ambassador, and as Secretary of War in the van Buren administration, he will always best be remembered for introducing the poinsettia into the United States.

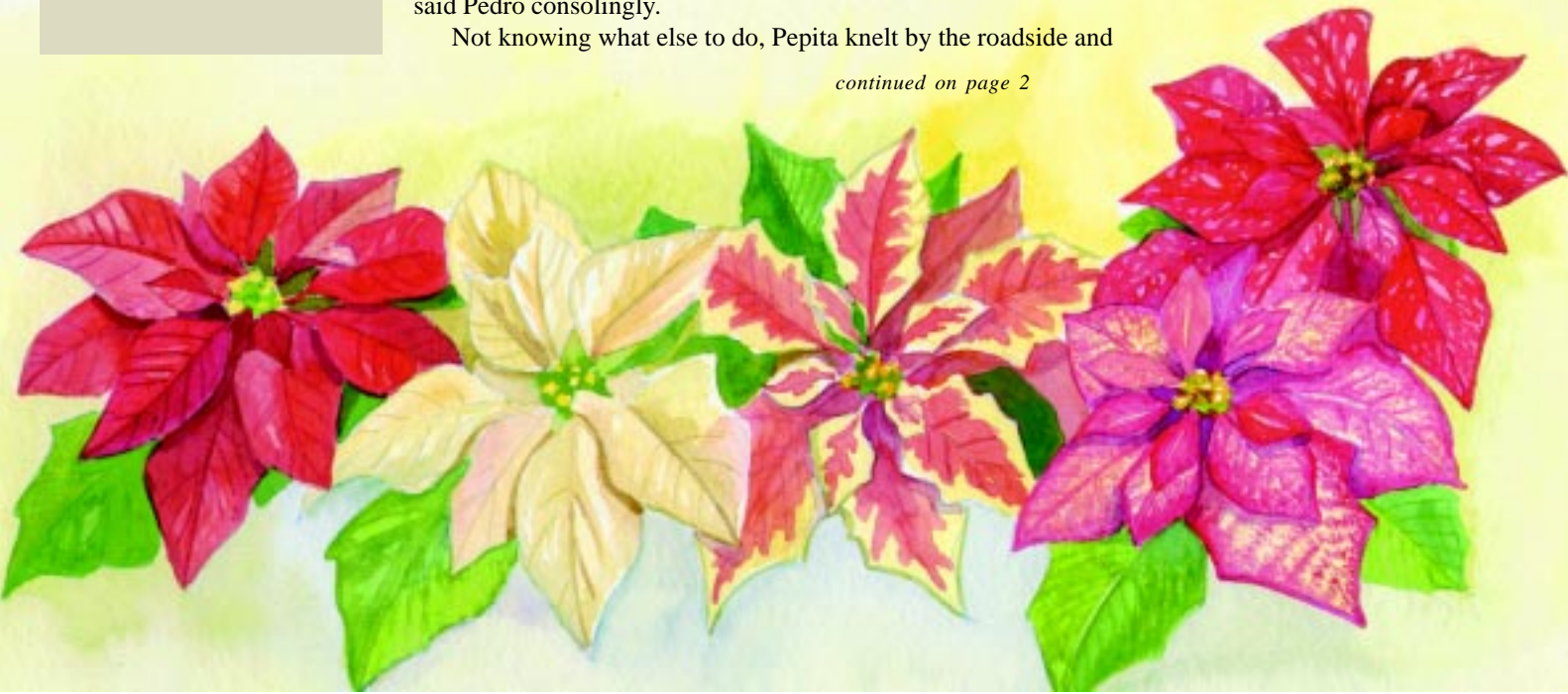
Modern poinsettias have been bred to be even more beautiful, and every Christmas, colorful poinsettias bring holiday cheer inside our homes. From the Ecke family, who have been bringing us the poinsettia for over 100 years, comes the following traditional tale:

Pepita, a poor Mexican girl, had no gift to present the Christ Child at Christmas Eve services. As Pepita walked slowly to the chapel with her cousin Pedro, her heart was filled with sadness.

“I am sure, Pepita, that even the most humble gift, if given in love, will be acceptable in his eyes,” said Pedro consolingly.

Not knowing what else to do, Pepita knelt by the roadside and

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BEHNKE'S AT BELTSVILLE

11300 Baltimore Ave. (U.S.1)

Beltsville, MD 20705

(Two miles north of
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BELTSVILLE HOURS

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CLOSED THANKSGIVING DAY

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Sunday: 9AM-6PM

December 24: 8AM-5PM

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Potomac, MD 20854

(Two miles north of the
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Florist 301-983-4400

Please call for store hours

Poinsettias, from page 1

gathered a handful of common weeds, fashioning them into a small bouquet. Looking at the scraggly bunch of weeds, she felt more saddened and embarrassed than ever by the humbleness of her offering. She fought back a tear as she entered the small village chapel.

As she approached the altar, she remembered Pedro's kind words and felt her spirit lift as she knelt to lay the bouquet at the foot of the nativity scene. Suddenly, the bouquet of weeds burst into blooms of brilliant red, and all who saw them were certain that they had witnessed a Christmas miracle right before their eyes.

From that day on, the bright red flowers were known as the *Flores de Noche Buena*, or *Flowers of the Holy Night*, for they bloomed each year during the Christmas season. □



Outstanding Poinsettia Varieties for 2003

At Behnke's, you'll always find an impressive variety of poinsettias to choose from. We're proud to bring you the best of the old and new. And, as always, these are all Behnke Signature Poinsettias — simply the finest plants available anywhere. We grow them ourselves! Be sure to shop early for best selection.

'Strawberries and Cream' Tired of the old standby varieties of poinsettias? 'Strawberries 'n Cream' is definitely different than any other poinsettia that you will ever see. Unique, cream and dark pink combination with heavily serrated bracts and leaves. Sure to be the talk of your holiday dinner conversation.

'Carousel Pink' Like a carousel in motion. 'Carousel Pink' offers unique ruffled pink bracts atop dark green foliage. Attractive sport of the popular variety 'Carousel Red'.

'Enduring Pink' New for 2003! Strong pink bracts held above dark green leaves. Compact growth habit. Absolutely beautiful!

'Prestige Red' Beautiful dark red bracts with dark leaves. Strong upright growth habit; V-shaped branching. A "must have" for the traditional poinsettia lover.

'Sonora White Glitter' Exciting bicolor poinsettia with distinct white splashes against dark red bracts. Speckling is more pronounced than earlier varieties — this is a show stopper!

'Jester Jingle' One of the most unusual varieties available. Bracts are held upright like that of a jester's hat. 'Jester Jingle' has distinct pink or white specks against red bracts.

'Freedom Red' Large showy dark red bracts, dark green foliage. Extremely long shelf life in the home environment. America's top seller.

'Monet Twilight' Exquisite novelty variety of poinsettia. Outstanding multi-colored cream/rose/pink bracts which appear almost airbrushed. Medium green foliage. Color is intensified as bracts mature.

'Snowcap White' Superior, bright white bracts with medium green foliage. Vigorous.

'Orion Red' Rich, dark red bracts are held above dark green foliage. Prized for its excellent color and resistance to bract fading. Superior shelf life. Very early to bloom.

'Success Red' Elegant, bright red, silky smooth bracts. Late blooming, somewhat erect habit gives a fresher appearance at Christmas. Absolutely stunning.



Caring for Your Fresh Cut Christmas Tree

—by Lori Hicks

Ah, the cut Christmas tree, age-old tradition and beloved holiday icon. A little extra trouble, but well worth it apparently—despite the proliferation of the artificial tree, cut tree sales are still quite strong each year. This is probably because many people prefer the freshness, fragrance and authenticity of the real thing. But we'll leave the "fresh or faux" decision up to you....we've got you covered either way!

Get Fresh Fresh trees have stronger fragrance, drop fewer needles, and most importantly, are more fire resistant. Determining the freshness of a tree can be a bit tricky. Try the tests listed here to guide you, but first and foremost, consider this: Always buy from a reputable dealer, who will do everything possible to preserve the freshness of the tree *before you buy it*. These measures add to the price of the tree—so in most cases, the cheapest tree is not the best choice.

To test for freshness, grasp a limb in one hand and gingerly run your hand toward the end of the branch, going in the same direction of the needles (do not move your hand in the opposite direction....ouch!). Every tree will shed a few needles, but if you end up with a handful of them, find another tree. Another test is to lift the tree a few inches off the ground and drop it. A sprinkling of needles is normal, but if your shoes are suddenly green, you might want to keep looking.

Size Matters Trees tend to look smaller outdoors. Be careful not to choose a tree that won't fit in your home. Remember that tree stands add a few inches to the height of the tree, and don't forget to allow space for that priceless Homer Simpson treetop ornament.

Net Worth Reputable Christmas tree dealers will wrap your tree in netting to make it easy to handle—both when it comes to putting it on and taking it off your vehicle, and when bringing it indoors.

Make the Cut Behnke Nurseries will make a fresh cut on the trunk of your tree, ensuring maximum water absorption. If you didn't purchase your tree from Behnke's, saw an inch or so from the trunk to enable the tree to absorb more water and stay fresher longer.

Take the Plunge If you're not going to set the tree up immediately, go straight home from the tree lot, and plunge the base of the tree into a 5 gallon bucket (or similar) of water. You want to keep that fresh cut moist. Park the tree in the shade and hose it down in the morning if the weather is unseasonably warm or dry. If the weather is below freezing, bring the tree indoors and park it in its bucket, in an out-of-the-way spot until you're ready to set it up.

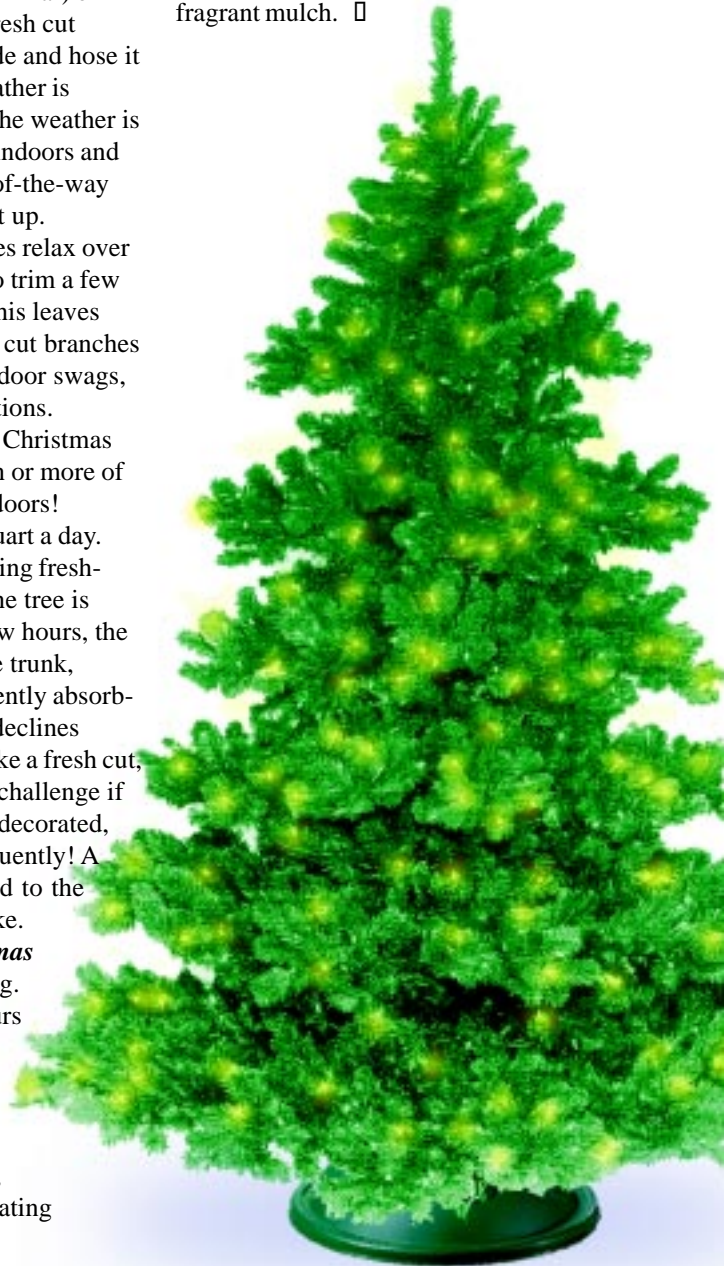
Trim a Tree Since tree branches relax over the holidays, it's a good idea to trim a few of the lower-most branches. This leaves room for lots of presents! The cut branches can be used to make wreaths, door swags, kissing balls and other decorations.

Water, Water Every Day A cut Christmas tree can easily soak up a gallon or more of water the first 24 hours it is indoors! Afterwards, it may require a quart a day. Moisture is critical to maintaining freshness, so check frequently! If the tree is without moisture for even a few hours, the sap may seal the cut end of the trunk, preventing the tree from efficiently absorbing new water. And a dry tree declines rapidly. Ideally, you would make a fresh cut, but this would present quite a challenge if the tree is already lighted and decorated, so check the water supply frequently! A product such as *Prolong* added to the water may improve water uptake.

Only You Can Prevent Christmas Tree Fires This bears repeating.

Check your tree every few hours the first day, and daily thereafter. Do not allow the water level fall below the bottom of the trunk. And of course, keep your tree away from fireplaces, heaters, stoves, candles, or heating vents.

Return Your Tree to Nature After Christmas, remove all decorations from the tree and prop it up outdoors to provide a haven for birds and other critters. You may want to cut a few boughs and use them to cover beds of pansies or perennials that could use some winter protection. You can even keep your tree until spring and take it to your local recycling center to be turned into free, fragrant mulch. □



Holidays at Behnkes

HOLIDAY OPEN HOUSE AT BELTSVILLE

Thursday, November 20, 2003, 6 to 9PM

Kick off the holiday season in style and get your decorating juices flowing with a visit to Behnke's at Beltsville on the evening of November 20, 2003. Enjoy the lovely strains of harpist Jim Dronenburg — he serenades you with traditional carols as you meander through the rooms and greenhouses, all lit up and glowing with holiday ambience. Shop for original gifts and be inspired by decorating demonstrations as you nibble on festive holiday treats. Please join us!



POINSETTIAS ON PARADE AT LARGO

Saturday, November 22, 2003, 10AM to 4PM

It isn't the distinctive paper cover, printed with the Behnke name, that makes a Behnke Signature Poinsettia. It's the professionals who grow the most perfect poinsettias available — they stand as the benchmark against which all other poinsettias can be measured. Take advantage of this once-a-year opportunity to see our fabulous poinsettia greenhouses in Largo. Acres of greenhouses, in fact, and filled with 50,000 blooming poinsettias! You'll tour our production greenhouse brimming with Behnke Signature Poinsettias at their peak. Professional growers will be on hand to answer your questions and describe the process which brings the plants into bloom on schedule. Bring a camera so that your family can take advantage of this perfect backdrop for your holiday photos!

Book Review

Perennial Combinations

by C. Colston Burrell Reviewed by John Peter Thompson

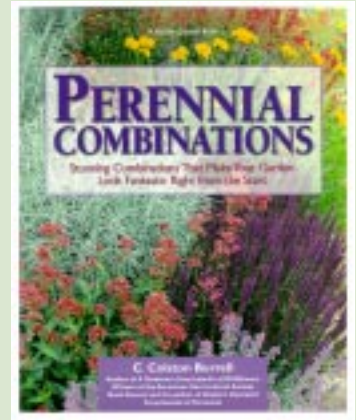
Usually gardening books are either *a*: functionally relevant, but relegated to the reference section, or *b*: beautiful picture books, whose organization is not very useful or easily accessible for daily practical use. *Perennial Combinations* is that rare book which is both practical and beautiful. The reader can leave this book on a coffee table and be assured that guests will leaf through, enchanted by the great photographs and descriptions, while the gardener can easily use the well-planned sections to help in all aspects of gardening—from layout and design to execution and maintenance.

For those gardeners who think that the challenges of trial and error in color combinations and aesthetically well-designed plans is the end all of gardening, this book might take the fun out of daily dreaming, planting and replanting. For those who want to get straight to stunning, pleasing, show-off gardens, this *is* the book. The title does limit the style of garden to the herbaceous perennial group, which is for many gardeners the most impenetrable and challenging.

There is a cornucopia of gardening tips hidden in the *Secrets of the Garden* section that accompanies each photograph and execution plan. From mildew control to shade sedums, to occasional unexpected tips on plants such as rhubarb as an addition to the garden setting, Mr. Burrell provides quick, concise informative topics.

If you are thinking about designing and planting a perennial garden, this is the book to add to your holiday gift list. Even if you simply enjoy the work of others, this book will help you identify the great combinations which attract your interest, and help you understand why they work so well.

The author, Cole Burrell, lives in our mid-Atlantic region, so his advice as to plant selection is appropriate for us. A frequent lecturer, he was one of the many terrific speakers at our Beltsville store during our 2003 Spring Seminar series. Watch for the listing of Behnke's 2004 Spring Seminars in our January newsletter.



Behnke Coupon

**50% Off
Any One Book**

Choose from our large selection*
of gardening books.

*Coupon must be presented at time of purchase, and may not be combined with other offers. *Limited selection at Largo.*

Offer expires December 31, 2003.



Holidays at Behnkes

The holiday season rapidly approaches and all Behnke helpers are busy assembling the special items to make holiday decorating festive and easy. Behnke's holiday offering is illuminating and decorative—especially the trendy pre-lighted trees, wreaths, garlands and fiber optics.



Of course you'll also find a great selection of traditional unlit trees, wreaths and garlands, both fresh and faux. Deck the halls, branches, mantles and walls with bows, ribbons, picks, and specially chosen keepsakes — including blown-glass ornaments imported from Eastern Europe. You'll always find something special at Behnke's to make your holiday season memorable.



Our feathered friends will appreciate your thoughtfulness, too, when you surprise them with a little holiday gift of their own. You'll love our large selection of bird feeders, seed and suet — to keep the birds in your neighborhood healthy through the winter.

The Droll Yankee Flipper (pictured at right) is the definitive squirrel-proof bird feeder. Birds love to eat from it, but squirrels are denied access in a way that will make you smile. The weight-activated feeding perch is calibrated to react to a squirrel's weight — when one steps on the perch, the perch spins, and off goes the squirrel.... "Curses! Foiled again!"



Remember the special gardeners in your life with gifts that reflect their garden personality or helps them to better enjoy the garden experience. Garden ornaments, animals, sundials, gazing balls, statuary, fountains, benches and many other decorations for the garden will be greatly appreciated. Decorative flags are always popular gift items.



Earn Behnke Bucks As You Holiday Shop!

Every Tuesday and Thursday in December (before Christmas) you will earn \$1 in Behnke Bucks for every \$10 of your purchase total! Redeem the bucks early in 2004 to purchase indoor plants, flower and vegetable seeds, seed starting supplies, bird feeding supplies, tools, soils, fertilizers, and more.

A Holiday Tradition

— by Mark Behnke

The holiday season is fast approaching. Poinsettias in the greenhouses are showing color – red, white, pink and many more as they have for generations at Behnke Nurseries. Preparations for the holidays to come are well under way. Now, is the perfect time to make plans for special decorations, family gatherings, and traditions. The holiday traditions that my grandparents, Albert and Rose Behnke, held centered around a German Christmas and the arrival of *Weihnachtsmann* (the guy who brings the loot!). They always decorated the Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. My grandfather, Opa, liked to have a live spruce as the Christmas tree. The aroma of a fresh spruce in the house made Christmas ring true. Opa would always set the fresh, balled and burlapped tree in a large galvanized tub, which was then set on top of another up-side-down galvanized tub. After this, Oma, my grandmother, would close the doors to the room and decorate it in secret. Moreover, after the holiday the memory of each Christmas would be preserved as each year the live tree would be taken down and planted in a special place in the yard. (This was done within a week, 10 days at the latest, in order to reduce the shock effect of cold weather on the tree after having been inside.)

My childhood memories of Christmas Eve day at my grandparents house in Burtonsville, Maryland, include a traditional dinner in the late afternoon. In addition to the turkey and other favorites, we would have special lunch meats and cheeses – wursts, schenken, etc. from a downtown, Washington D.C., deli. One time Opa even took me along to the deli to help! I knew this was special, because here was Opa buying lunch meat. Another food tradition was the smoked eel, which came through the mail. I will never forget the look and taste of it, dark brown skin and salty, and because it was so unique, it became a tradition that I looked forward to each and every year. The evening centered around the exchange of gifts, but before we could even set foot in the room with the Christmas tree and presents, the whole family would gather together and sing *Silent Night*. After this, Oma and Opa would open the doors to the living room, and we would stand in awe of the beautiful Christmas tree and much anticipated presents. For a child, this was magic. The kind of magic that creates a lifetime of wonderful memories.

For all of us at Behnke Nurseries, I hope this holiday season finds you safe, healthy and enjoying those traditions that are special to you. ☐



Albert Behnke at Christmas in 1965, with two of his grandchildren, Stephanie Thompson Fleming (r), and Victor Behnke.



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Holiday Open House!
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