

# The history of the poinsettia

The plant we know today as the poinsettia has a long and interesting history. The fact is, that lovely plant you place in your home during the holidays was once used as a fever medicine!

Native to Central America, the plant flourished in an area of Southern Mexico known as Taxco del Alarcon. The ancient Aztecs had a name for this plant found blooming in the tropical highlands during the short days of winter: **cuetlaxochitl**. Not merely decorative, the Aztecs put the plant to practical use. From its bracts they extracted a purplish dye for use in textiles and cosmetics. The milky white sap, today called latex, was made into a preparation to treat fevers.



*Joel Roberts Poinsett*

The poinsettia may have remained a regional plant for many years to come had it not been for the efforts of Joel Roberts Poinsett (1779 - 1851). The son of a French physician, Poinsett was appointed as the first United States Ambassador to Mexico (1825 - 1829) by President Madison. Poinsett had attended medical school himself, but his real love in the scientific field was botany. (Mr. Poinsett later founded the institution which we know today as the Smithsonian Institution).

Poinsett maintained his own hothouses on his Greenville, South Carolina plantations, and while visiting the Taxco area in 1828, he became enchanted by the brilliant red blooms he saw there. He immediately sent some of the plants back to South Carolina, where he began propagating the plants and sending them to friends and botanical gardens.

Among the recipients of Poinsett's work was John Bartram of Philadelphia, who in turn gave the plant over to another friend, Robert Buist, a Pennsylvania nurseryman. Mr. Buist is thought to be the first person to have sold the plant under its botanical name, *Euphorbia pulcherrima* (literally, "the most beautiful Euphorbia"). Though it is thought to have become known by its more popular name of poinsettia around 1836, the *origin* of the name is certainly clear!