

Poinsettias - The Real Story



Around Christmastime time each year, Poinsettias are a popular decorative flower. The plant was introduced to North America by John Poinsett the first American Ambassador to Mexico (1825-1829). He became interested in the plant while visiting near Taxco, Mexico. In 1828 Poinsett collected some of the plants and cultivated them in hot houses on his Greenville, South Carolina plantation. The plant became popular after he sent some of the plants to his

friends and some to botanical gardens.

Flores de Noche Buena is one name for the plant that recalls the story of a poor Mexican girl who had no gift to leave at the altar on Christmas Eve. On her way to the church a friend told her “surely anything given in love will be acceptable”. The girl gathered some weeds from the side of the path, arranged them into a bouquet and left them at the altar. Suddenly, the bouquet of weeds burst into blooms of brilliant red. All who saw it were sure that they had witnessed a miracle. Thereafter the plant was known as Las Flores de Noche Buena (The Flowers of the Holy Night).

Ah - but that’s not the whole story! The poinsettia has not always been a small pretty pot sized plant. The plant we know today was developed by Albert Ecke, a German immigrant who used a complex grafting technique to transform the bush like member of the Spurge family into the plant that we see today.

The plant is native to Central America and was known to the Aztecs as a treatment for fever. In Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, the plant is called Cuetlaxochitl meaning "skin flower."



While prowling the hidden recesses of the internet I discovered a darker past for this beautiful Christmas plant. Long ago the plant was just an ordinary little bush with out any of the bright coloration so popular today. (See photo at left)

The Aztecs were pantheists who had many gods that controlled their daily existence and ultimately the fate of the people. In the Aztec city Tenochtitlan, Huitzilopochtli was the chief god. He was the god of war AND the sun god. Humans were sacrificed to him

so he could maintain his strength and to preserve his favor.

One day the call went out to bring suitable people for to the Great Pyramid Altar so they



could be sacrificed. As the priests’ henchmen approached a group of young girls that the people had indicated would be a suitable sacrifice the girls began to cry out for deliverance. Xochioquetzal, called the flower goddess, heard their cries and was moved to rescue them. Quickly she called them together into small groups and noticing a near by Cuetlaxochitl bush she disguised them as flowers growing among the tree’s leaves.(See second bush photo.) Their heads were to the center of the group with their bodies surrounding the center in petal like extensions. The disguise was so successful

that the Priest's agents were not able to find any one to sacrifice. When Huitzilopochtli learned of this he was so angry that he demanded the young girls be forever held captive by all the following generations of the Cuetlaxochitl bush.



The girls were delighted to have escaped being sacrificed and were so grateful to Xochioquetza that spend their time singing her praises.



(Judging by the shape of their lips these are most likely altos.)

Even today with all the changes that the delicate grafting of Albert Ecke has brought about, if you look closely you can still see the girl's faces (See photo below.) as they sing their praises to Xochioquetzal.

