ARE YOU NAUGHTY OR NICE TO PONSETTIAS?

No doubt, your to-do list triples during the busy holiday season. Not only is Santa coming to town, but so are poinsettias! If you have been in the business long enough, you may remember when poinsettias could barely make it out the door without missing leaves or droopy bracts. Thanks to improved breeding and research, plants should now leave your shop perky, with green leaves and lasting qualities — if you do your job right.

Ship Shape
Check to make sure your supplier is shipping at the right stage, otherwise quality will be compromised. All the bracts, including the small, center ones, should be colored, and the cyathia (center flower parts) should be beginning to open and show pollen. Poinsettias shipped too early will not color properly, and those shipped too late are more susceptible to disease. Including the small, center ones, should be beginning to open and show pollen. Poinsettias shipped too early will not color properly, and those shipped too late are more susceptible to disease, including Botrytis and powdery mildew. Shipping duration should be three days or less to avoid premature leaf and cyathia drop.

Varieties are scheduled to mature every one to two weeks throughout the season, providing blooming plants from early November until Christmas day. Consider making multiple orders during the season to get the freshest plants available.

Plants need protection during transit to prevent bruising and mechanical damage and may arrive in carts, flats or sleeved in a box. Check the plants immediately upon arrival. Remove the sleeves and pot covers without delay and take the pots from the carts and flats. This allows free air flow around the whole plant, reduces humidity, prevents disease and allows in needed light.

Processing Dos and Don’ts

DO UNWRAP PONSETTIAS. Many retailers and mass outlets make the mistake of leaving poinsettias in their sleeves or on carts until sold. This rapidly diminishes quality, making plants unsalable or, worse, sends valuable customers home with a plant that will not last.

DO BE GENTLE. Sleeping plants can make bracts droop, a condition known as epinasty. Bending the leaves and bracts upward in the sleeve initiates the production of ethylene. While plants will bounce back once out of the sleeve, the longer they’re sleeved, the worse the condition and the longer the recovery. Gently tear the sleeve along the seam, avoiding abrasion to the leaves and bracts. Fortunately, many growers are now using permanent plant rings that support the plant and prevent stems from breaking.

DO NOT STORE IN THE COOLER or place poinsettias outside on a cold day. Poinsettias are highly susceptible to damage by chilling and should never be exposed to temperatures below 50F. Chilling-injury symptoms — bluing or whitening of the bracts — usually appear within two days of exposure. Plants need to be maintained between 65 to 75F.

DO DISCARD DISEASED PLANTS. Infections that develop during production and improper shipping conditions can cause Botrytis, which results in brown spots on bracts and leaves and covers the cyathia in smoky, gray spores. Holding in sleeves or boxes and overhead watering exacerbate the problem.

DO CALL YOUR SUPPLIER immediately if plants are infested.

DO NOT PLACE IN DIRECT SUNLIGHT or hot or cold drafts. Display them in high light with adequate spacing so the plants do not touch and you have easy watering access. Remove any lower leaves that may have yellowed, browned or dropped.

DO KEEP THE SOIL MOIST and the leaves and bracts dry. Poinsettias are very sensitive to extremes and will not recover if allowed to wilt. Check plants daily and water when the surface of the soil feels dry to the touch. When watering, allow excess water to drain out the bottom of the pot. Discard excess water, as pots left sitting in water may suffer from permanent root rot. When pots are foil-wrapped or placed in pre-formed covers, discard the water collected in the pot cover. If you can, avoid displaying in pot covers.

DO PROVIDE CARE TAGS to customers to ensure the poinsettia is displayed in a well-lit spot away from hot and cold drafts, and watered properly. Make sure customers understand that even a few minutes of freezing temperatures can destroy the plant.

DO FOLLOW THIS LIST. The care you provide is vital in assuring high quality plants reach your customers. Check it twice, as your customers will know if you’ve been bad and will reward retailers who’ve been good.

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GO SLEEVELESS Yellow leaves, leaf drop, bract and cyathia drop and diseased bracts — those sure-fire signs of the danger of keeping plants in sleeves are seen in the plant on the right. The healthy poinsettia on the left was displayed without a sleeve in high light, with plenty of room.