

Are prefinished poinsettias in your future?

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Prefinished poinsettias offer both purchaser and producer greater management flexibility through a more rapid turnover of greenhouse space and, subsequently, a more rapid cash flow. These plants, usually purchased in October, do not require repotting. Upon receipt the plants are placed at the final spacing and grown for Christmas sale.

Buying and finishing prefinished stock allows the grower to by-pass conventional production steps and spend time and energy on other business endeavors while still producing poinsettias for Christmas sale. This luxury of buying time costs money. However, in many cases it is well worth the price.

Conventional poinsettia growers produce their own cuttings from stock plants purchased in 2 1/4" pots in May or June. Over the next two-three months the plants are pinched repeatedly, and large plants with numerous breaks are produced. Cuttings are removed beginning as early as mid- to late-July (for production of pinched plants in 10" containers) and continuing until mid-September (if 3-4" single stem plants are to be produced). This production strategy requires a big investment in time, labor and greenhouse space prior to the production of the final potted plants for Christmas sale. Specialized propagating areas, with mist and bottom heat, are also essential for high quality uniform cutting production.

Using prefinished material is comparable in many ways to using purchased plugs instead of sowing your own bedding plant seed or to buying rooted poinsettia cuttings rather than producing your own. In all cases, the grower pays a little more for a service, i.e. purchasing plants which are higher quality than can be produced in-house or purchasing plants to save time, labor and/or space.

There are other good reasons for buying prefinished plants. Some growers, who produce their own cuttings, buy some prefinished material because they are not capable of producing all of the cuttings required to fill their own needs or to simply round-out the selection for their customers. For example, a grower may specialize in red poinsettias using two, three or four cultivars and a couple of standard pot sizes. However, this same grower may feel it is desirable to offer the customer a wider selection of colors, cultivars and pot sizes.

Production of prefinished material enables a degree of specialization for the producer as well. The grower with a suitable propagation environment may already produce excess cutting for outside sale. This activity provides some revenue during a season which is ordinarily slow. Potting cuttings and growing the plants until additional greenhouse space is required in October can also result in additional revenue.

When buying prefinished material, it is very important to get accurate information regarding prior plant care. Contact the plant producers and ask about recent growing conditions; i.e. temperature regime, medium composition, slow release fertilizer usage, etc. Also inquire about recent chemical treatments; i.e. insects, disease and especially plant growth regulator treatments.

The poinsettia is a fairly sensitive crop. Sudden, large-scale changes in growing conditions can cause a shock response which can retard development and lead to other problems. Overfertilization can also be problematic. Finally, improper or excessive application of insecticides, fungicides or, especially, plant growth regulators can ruin a crop. Since the plants are typically purchased in early- to mid-October, some plants may have received one or more applications of growth retardant prior to shipment, depending on the spray schedule of the producer and the shipping date. Ask for this information so you don't over-do it or neglect to do it at all.

Carefully inspect all purchased material. Check for evidence of insect infestation and disease. Check the foliage for common problems such as whitefly and botrytis and the roots for fungus gnat larvae. Remember whenever material is moved into the greenhouse, there is the potential for importing insect and disease problems.

If you haven't tried prefinished poinsettias you may wish to purchase a small quantity of a size or cultivar you don't normally grow but would like to offer to your customers. Compare the problems (cost) and advantages yourself. Perhaps you'll find that prefinished poinsettias have a future in your operation.

