

Poinsettias of (too) many colors . . .



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Roses are red. Poinsettias are blue. Blue? That's right. And yellow and purple and orange, too. In reality, they're white poinsettias tinted with dyes and further jazzed up with sparkly glitter and a special sheen.

And as a former editor of mine used to say about stories of what I considered dubious merit, they're big — really big. Painted poinsettias have been on the market for a couple of years — I first told you about them two Christmases ago, but I never thought they'd make more than a momentary splash. Well, I was wrong.

To check on these brazen bracts — what most people think of as poinsettia blooms are bracts, or modified leaves — I stopped in at Hicks Nurseries in Westbury, which is always on the crest of what's hot in horticulture. I had barely gotten through the door when I was blinded by the gleam and glitter of these floral floozies. One plant even had bracts of different colors — bolder-than-bold orange and yellow and blue and pink and purple. For a second, I didn't know whether to giggle or gag.

I finally giggled. Walter Dworkin, the sales associate overseeing the display, was laughing. So were his colleagues, Lori VanDerlaske and Kim Mckelvey. "Some people love them," Walter said about the cosmetically enhanced flowers. "Some people hate them. But everyone is surprised by them. They're a big seller. Most people ask, 'Are they real?' I hybridize them myself; I say with a straight face. I'm joking, of course. What really gets me is when someone asks, 'Will they bloom the same color next year?'"

Walter is a kidder. "We started calling the ones with bubble-gum-pink glitter Paris Hilton. And they flew off the shelf." He brought out a perfectly lovely white poinsettia in a hanging pot for an impromptu demonstration. It was like getting gussied up at the cosmetics counter at Bloomingdale's. Lori spritzed it with special glue and Kim sprin-

kled on neon pink glitter. Like the dye used to color them, the glue is specially created to allow the plants to breathe. Don't try this at home with any old glue or spray paint.

From all reports, the painted ladies known as Fantasy Poinsettias are making a splash. Blue is the biggest hit. Some people even buy blue poinsettias for Hanukkah.

As for me, well, they do make me laugh, but they're not my cup of holiday cheer. It's like putting Santa hats on dogs. The only time to paint flowers is when you're putting them on canvas.

Besides, hybridizers are doing their own tinkering with nature, which is something I can understand. Or as Margaret Carnivale, who has been designing the poinsettia display in the greenhouse at Planting Fields Arboretum in Oyster Bay for the past six years, explained: "If poinsettias are well grown, they'll have flowers. If the flowers stay on long enough, they'll set seeds. Growers collect the seeds to hybridize new varieties."

Incidentally, when Margaret says flowers, she means flowers, not bracts. Poinsettia flowers are the small, yellowish, button-shaped clusters in the center of the colorful bracts.

About 300 pots of poinsettias — which are euphorbias, with milky sap in their stems — show off among the powderpuff plants and banana trees and other tropicals in the main greenhouse at Planting Fields, where the display runs through January. "Every year I tweak things," Margaret told me. "This year, unfortunately, we added blue poinsettias. Not many. I'd say the reaction has been fifty-fifty." She smiled diplomatically. "They're something to talk about."

Indeed. But the 20 varieties of

Poinsettia care

Pamper your poinsettias with at least three to four hours of direct sun every day and temperatures between 68 and 75 degrees. Cooler nighttime temperatures — but no lower than 55 degrees — will help the plants retain their natural color. Water when the soil surface feels dry. If the pot is wrapped in foil, remove it or poke a hole in the bottom so excess



PHOTOS BY IRENE VIRAG

Walter Dworkin of Hicks Nurseries in Westbury shows off painted Fantasy Poinsettias.

naturally festive poinsettias in the show made for much more interesting conversation. For people like me who are content to describe the holiday favorites as red, white or pink, Margaret is a marvel who rattles off varieties like a teacher rattling off the names of her charges: Kris Kringle, Lemon Snow, Champagne, Sonora Burgundy, Visions of Grandeur, White Glitter, Peterstar Marble, Redberry Punch, Prestige, Monet, Premium Miro.

"Lemon Snow is a rich, warm white. It's not as cold looking as some of the purer whites like Mars White, which served as the base plant for our blue poinsetti-

water can drain.

Enjoy your poinsettia for as long as you can, then do what most gardeners — including me — do. Say goodbye to the holiday season and let the plant enrich the compost pile. Or, if you want to try keeping your poinsettia and making it merry and bright next Christmas, visit my blog at irenevirag.com for more tips.

as," she told me. Peterstar Marble has a pink and cream marble affect. White Glitter is red with creamy white speckles. It grows that way — no decorations needed.

"I'd say everybody loves Monet," she said. "And people like the deep, rich burgundy poinsettias on the tree." I liked them, too. *Heliconia* and exotic-looking ginger plants top the 10-foot-tall Fraser fir, and Spanish moss drips from its branches. Mounds of Lemon Snow surround it.

Margaret pointed out Winter Rose, which features a red double-flower that looks more like a rose than a poinsettia, and Carousel, with ruffled bracts. "Undulating is how I describe them. They look like flames. And that's Kris Kringle over there with the crinkly bracts — how could you not like it?"

Every year, Margaret visits the poinsettia trials at Cornell University's Horticultural Research & Extension Center in Riverhead, where growers check out the latest cultivars. I couldn't get to the trials, which were held earlier this month, but I did touch base with Nora Catlin, the floriculture specialist in charge who grew more than

200 plants representing 70 cultivars from rooted cuttings supplied by major breeding companies.

"A lot of people just want a red poinsettia," Nora told me. "They want what their grandmother had on the table at Christmas. But sometimes, you want something a little different. One trend that has growers and customers excited are the marble cultivars in shades of pink and the ones with ruffled bracts. Everybody wants bigger bracts. Burgundies are very popular — there's one called Plum Pudding — so are the newer colors like apricot or cinnamon."

I guess I'm a purist when it comes to poinsettias. Reds are still my favorites. Unlike the painted show-offs, they look like poinsettias.

They look a lot like Christmas.

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