

the poinsettia story

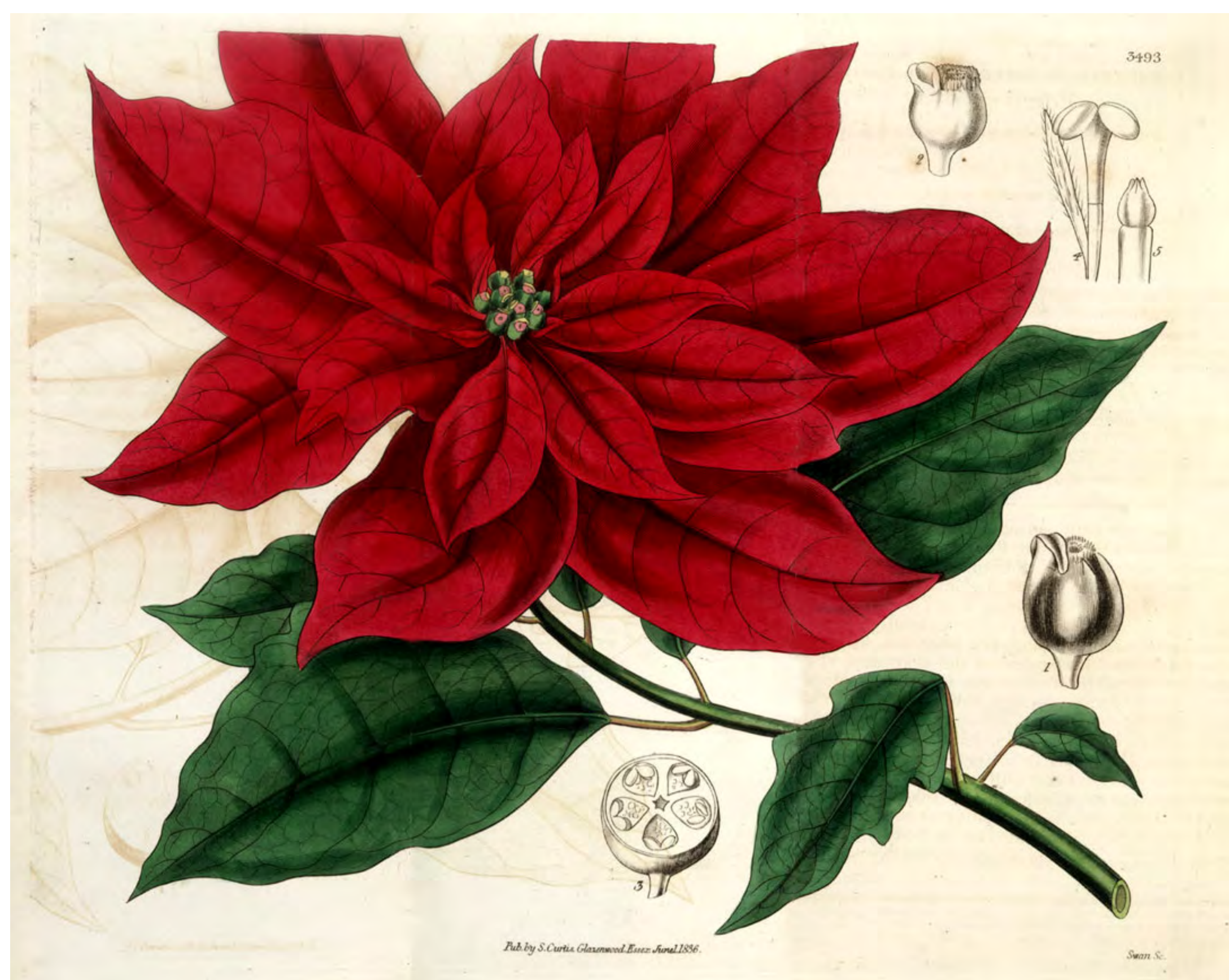
THE HISTORY OF THE POINSETTIA

14th-16th Centuries

Known as *cuetlaxochitle* by the Aztecs, poinsettias, native to Mexico, were used to make a reddish-purple fabric dye and as a fever-reducing medication made from the plant's milky sap.

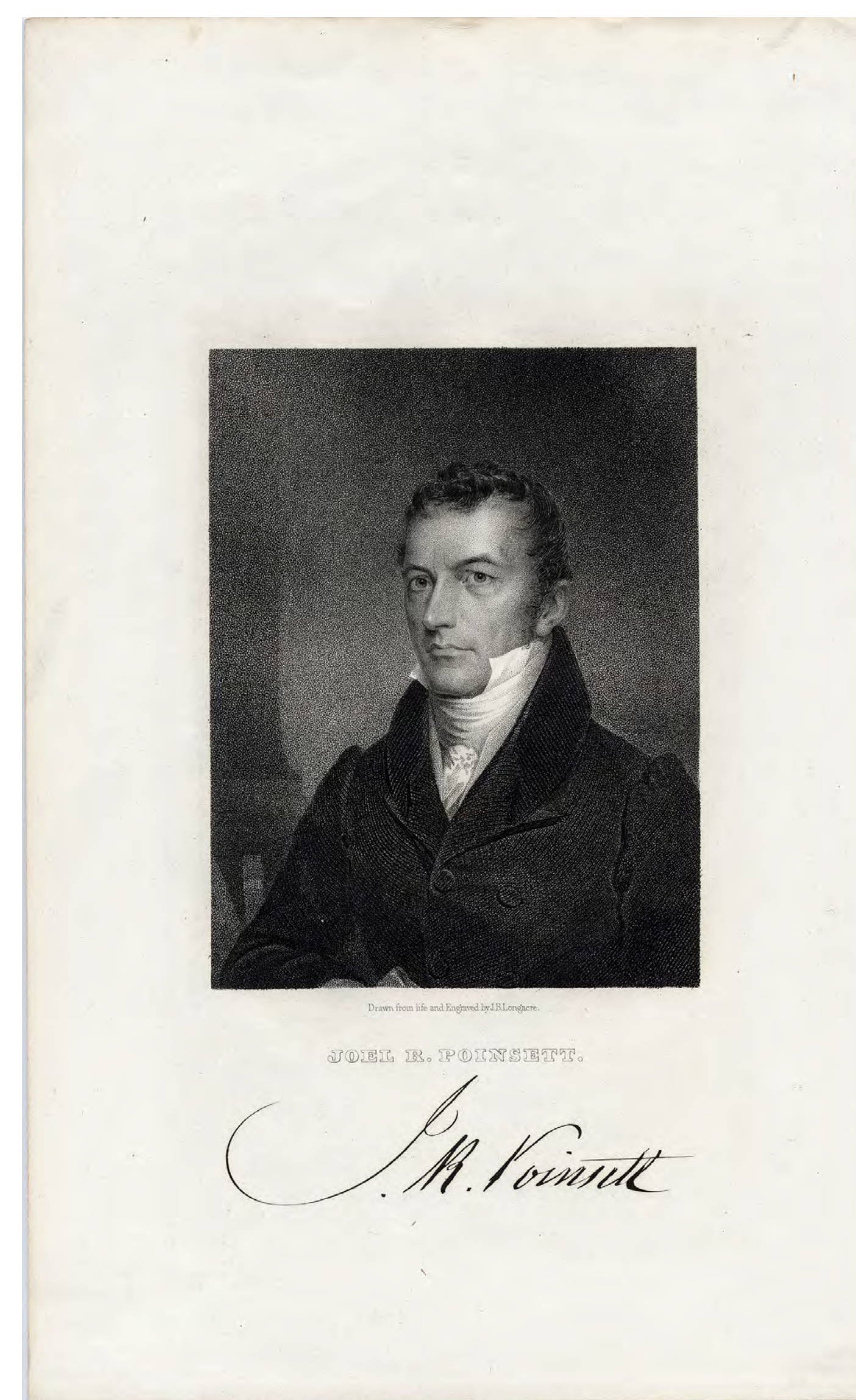
1828

Joel Roberts Poinsett, the first United States ambassador to Mexico, sends cuttings from Mexico to his home in South Carolina, where he begins propagating and sharing the plant with others.



16-17th Centuries

Poinsettias are commonly used in Christmas rituals in Mexico.



Poinsett portrait, courtesy of Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pa.

1829

The poinsettia is exhibited at PHS's first flower show, held on June 6. The exhibitor is Col. Robert Carr, married to Ann Bartram-Carr, the granddaughter of John Bartram. Carr received seeds and plants of "a new *Euphorbia* with bright scarlet bracteas or floral leaves" from Poinsett. Thus, the poinsettia is first introduced into cultivation and commercial trade by Bartram's Garden.

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1836

By this time, the common name “poinsettia” appears in the trade.



1834

Philadelphia plantsman and PHS vice-president Robert Buist introduces the plant to Europe under the botanical name *Euphorbia pulcherrima* (meaning “the most beautiful Euphorbia”).

1900 - 1990s

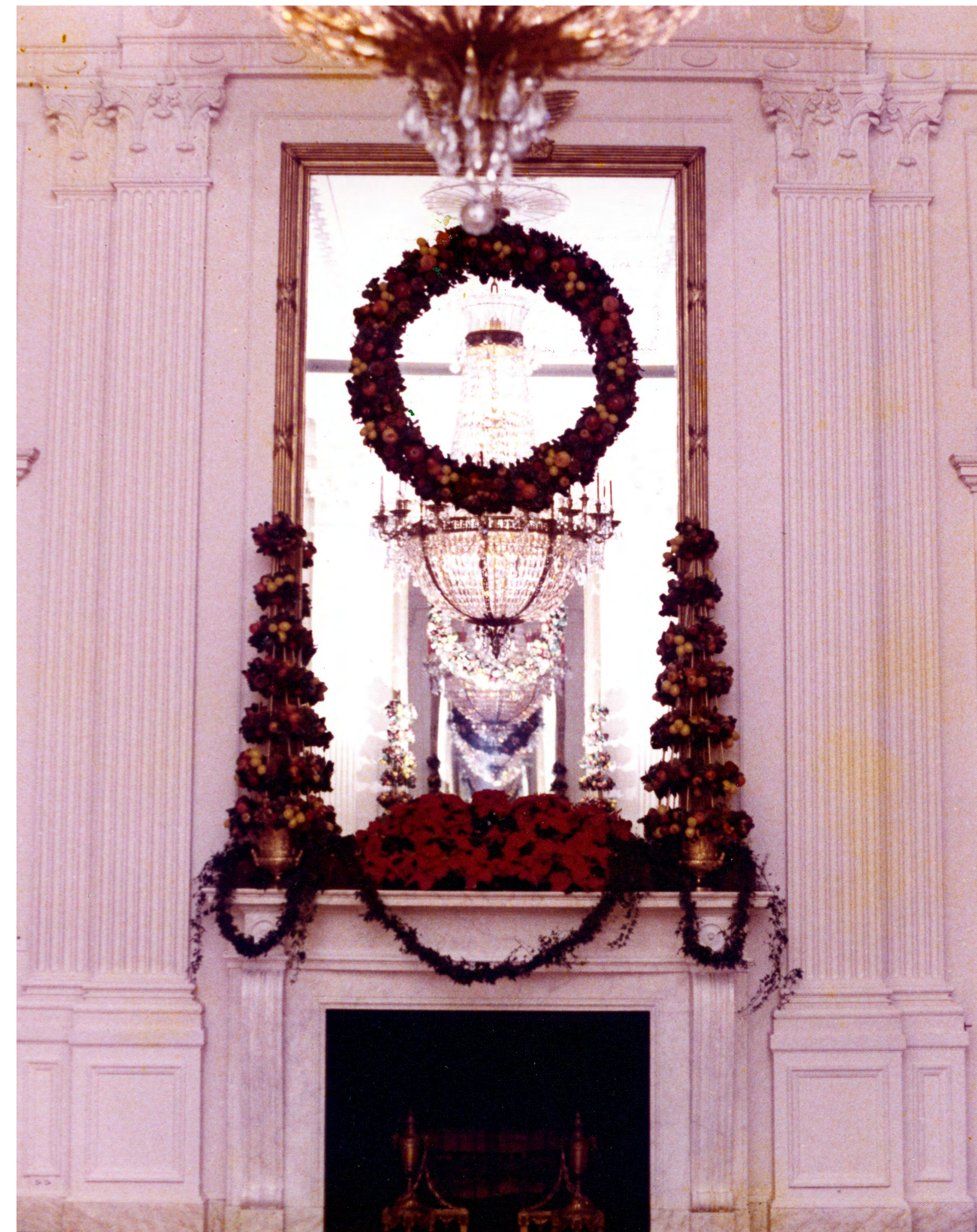
Poinsettia production in the United States is dominated by the Ecke family of growers in Encinitas, California. This family business was founded by Albert Ecke in 1900. His son Paul’s grafting technique was the “secret sauce” that made Ecke poinsettias grow full and compactly, while other growers produced inferior, weedy plants. Third-generation Ecke, Paul Jr., was a talented marketer who sent free plants to the White House and to television stations for seasonal display. When Paul Ecke, Jr. appeared on the *Tonight Show* to promote the plants, sales soared. The Ecke Ranch held a near monopoly on American poinsettia production until the 1990s, when university researchers discovered the grafting method used by the Eckes and dispensed the findings to the floriculture industry.

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1972

J. Liddon Pennock, Jr., owner of Meadowbrook Farm and floral designer to the “carriage trade,” is asked to decorate the White House at Christmas. He uses poinsettias sent courtesy of the Ecke Ranch in California.



2010

One hundred eighty years after PHS's first flower show, poinsettias make a comeback in the show as part of the central feature Explorer's Garden.

2012

After nearly 100 years as a family business, the Ecke Ranch is sold to the Dutch-based Agribio Group. The Ecke name stays with the new owners and even today Ecke sells nearly 70 percent of the market share of poinsettias in the United States and 50 percent in the world.



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CARING FOR YOUR POINSETTIA



In their native setting of Western Mexico, poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) are somewhat straggly perennial flowering shrubs or small trees, growing to a height of 10 to 15 feet. Its flower is an inconspicuous yellow cluster. The bright red leaves, known as bracts, are traditionally associated with the poinsettia, but today's breeders produce bracts in many colors, including pink, orange, cream and many shades of green.

To keep your poinsettia happy, either remove it from the brightly colored aluminum wrapper in which it is usually sold, or punch holes in the wrapper to allow for drainage. Place plants in a room receiving sufficient natural light at 60-70 degrees Fahrenheit; keep the plants out of hot or cool drafts. Water when the soil begins to dry out; keep the soil moist but not soggy.

While it is possible to get the poinsettia to rebloom in the next year, it does require some work, and most consumers are happy to purchase new plants each year.

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POINSETTIA FUN FACTS

1

The United States Postal Service featured the poinsettia on stamps three times: a 5-cent stamp in 1964, a 22-cent stamp in 1985 and, most recently in 2013 (with a reissue in 2014) a “Forever” stamp.



5-cent stamp image, courtesy Smithsonian National Postal Museum.
22-cent and Forever stamp images, © United States Postal Service. All rights reserved.

2

Did you know that the poinsettia is so popular that it garners 85% of all holiday pot plant sales? More than 34 million poinsettias are sold annually in the United States.

3

Many people think that the colorful red parts of poinsettias are flowers. They are actually a special type of leaf, called a bract. The flowers are small, rather inconspicuous yellow clusters, surrounded by the red showy bracts, which serve as a lure to attract pollinators to the flowers.

4

California leads the country in poinsettia production, followed by North Carolina, Texas, Florida and Ohio.



Photograph courtesy André Karwath.

5

National Poinsettia Day is December 12. Declared by Congress in 1991, this day commemorates Dr. Joel Roberts Poinsett, who died on this day in 1851.

6

Contrary to popular belief, poinsettias are NOT poisonous. This urban legend sprang from an erroneous news report in 1919 of a child reputed to have died from eating one poinsettia leaf.