



By W. W. WHEATLY

Merry Christmas

The poinsettia is what it is today because it won its own struggle for survival in the jungle; because our minister to Mexico in 1822 was a botanist; and because Paul Ecke has made it his lifework

POINSETTIA fields are bloom this month! On gently rolling hills, a scant mile back from the blue Pacific, there is a rising tide of color. Hundreds of acres of America's popular Christmas plants are drinking in Southern California sunshine in San Diego County and adding color to their flame-red bracts.

By Christmas week hundreds of thousands of poinsettia stems, topped by these gorgeous floral leaves, will arrive at florists' shops on their way to Western homes. Greenhouses all over the country are bursting with a scarlet flood of potted poinsettia plants.

We are indebted to two Americans, Joel Poinsett and Paul Ecke, for our Christmas flower—the poinsettia. Back in the early part of the last century Joel Roberts Poinsett, the first United States minister to Mexico, brought the plant to this country. During the last 30 years the genius of Paul Ecke, the California poinsettia grower, has developed assembly-line methods of propagation to supply flowers in sufficient quantity to meet the steadily increasing demand.

Seldom do we think of business in connection with flowers. We somehow take it for granted that they sort of grow themselves. But when one contemplates the numbers of flowers that appear at Christmas time, it means just one thing—organization.

Brisk Paul Ecke exemplifies organization. This bronzed Westerner treads his acres in cowboy boots . . . no lost motion, no excess bulk to carry about . . . just brown and sinew, and a warm, good-natured disposition . . . a hard handshake . . . hands that work, that have always worked. This is the impression one gets on meeting Paul Ecke—and the impression lasts.

For Paul Ecke is no polished-desk executive. His offices are in his original farm cottage, still complete with corner cupboard and open fireplace. They lie across the friendly tree-bordered road from his extensive greenhouses.

Why, one might ask, are greenhouses necessary for a flower as hardy as a field plant in the mild Southern California climate? But, in order to have the poinsettia reach perfection by Christmas time, the conditions under which it grows must be uniform and completely under control. A flower grower, after all, is a farmer, often staking his whole year's earnings on a single crop that cannot be left to the caprice of nature.

Luckily, in greenhouses the grower can make his own weather.

Years ago Paul Ecke decided that if the poinsettia were to be grown widely enough to supply the nation with the flowers it was clamoring for, the industry would have to develop from a local, cut-flower business into a greenhouse-potted-plant business. So he went about making it just that.

It is practical, Ecke found, to grow the propagating stock out-of-doors in Southern California, then to ship these poinsettias to greenhouses all over the United States where they can be grown on under glass for Christmas plants. This procedure eliminates the danger of shipping full-grown plants, makes them available everywhere, and assures a uniform supply for local florists. So, whether you live in a small town, in a big city, or on a farm, thanks to Paul Ecke, the greenhouse growers, and florists all over the country, you can buy your beautiful potted holiday flower this Christmas week.

PAUL ECKE has devoted his adult life to growing and selecting the poinsettia. When he first began, some varieties of the poinsettia were so fragile that they often lost their green foliage before Christmas. Paul Ecke set about through laborious experiments to produce types that would keep their foliage. He culled the weak plants and built up the strong, improving his stock year by year until he succeeded in so stabilizing the poinsettia that now it can be depended upon to bloom true to color and in time for Christmas. But the job of purifying the poinsettia is never done. The minute a plant shows signs of weakness or disease it is torn up and burned. The soil it grew in is fumigated before another plant is set in its place. The behavior of a plant becomes as well known to this specialist as that of his own children. When a man devotes all of his interest, energy, and passion for work to one plant, he notices the slightest inclination on the part of the flower to deviate from its preferred character and habits.

Plants like the poinsettia, which are not generally grown from seed, are improved by selection, by watching for and doing something about the variations from the true type. Thus it was that the new double poinsettia was first found, and after several years of experimental growing, Paul Ecke named it for his mother—"Henrietta."

The entire Ecke family are poinsettia-minded. [To page 55]

FLOWER

This year American florists will raise more than 10,000,000 potted poinsettias from stock supplied by Paul Ecke (shown below with one of his daughters) from his San Diego County ranch



E. F. BUSHMAN



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Family Circle

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