

# Color for Christmas

BY GRACE THORNE ALLEN



Christmas means poinsettias, and poinsettias mean Paul Ecke, who took the wild, unpredictable immigrant from Mexico and made it into a tame beauty that blooms each year in time for the holidays

THERE'S one thing sure, red and green mean Christmas. So the green-leafed, flaming red poinsettia has two counts in its favor to make it a Christmas flower. Besides, it comes to full bloom in the California fields in December, and greenhouse growers all over the country have learned to time their crops for the holiday season, too. No one knows just when the poinsettia became a part of your Christmas decorations, but a good bet is that it happened after Paul Ecke started to tame this wild immigrant from Mexico. In southern California, as in its homeland, the poinsettia grows lustily but unpredictably. Some varieties bloom in October, some in January. And the parent plants never know what their young seedlings will grow up to be. Pretty, maybe, but not a good bet commercially.

Greenhouse growers had scarcely better luck than nature in making the poinsettia bloom true and in time for Christmas, until Paul Ecke took on the job of stabilizing its wild beauty.

His father, Albert Ecke, raised vegetables for the Los Angeles market, but his hobby was raising flowers. And in his hobby garden he planted the poinsettia. Young Paul didn't want to be a farmer, but something about the flower must have fascinated him. For he set to work on it twenty-five years ago, and now he has four hundred acres of flaming fields

covering the hills twenty miles north of San Diego just off the coastal highway, where tourists come to gape—or did when there were tourists.

From these fields Ecke sells stock to nurserymen in every state. He even sends the stable, improved progeny of the poinsettia back to its native Mexico and, before the war, shipped them as far as the Philippines. He has done such a good job of building a beautiful, predictable plant that most of his grower customers find it cheaper and better to start fresh each spring with new stock from Ecke, rather than to propagate their own.

Ecke harvests two big crops a year. In early spring, tractors dig the major crop—dormant brown roots, the result of 100,000 cuttings put in the spring before. These are boxed and shipped out by the carload. It's a rush harvest, for each grower wants his new stock to arrive on the Monday after Easter. That's the first day he has time to start, and he wants to get going to ready his bloom for Christmas.

Ecke's second crop, though only a by-product of the other, is the spectacular one. For three weeks before Christmas he cuts hundreds of thousands of brilliant blooms and ships them out, packed in dry ice, as far as the East Coast. Before the war, he sent them even to Hawaii. Skilled cutters work in the fields from dawn to dusk while runners stand by to receive the flowers, load them over their shoulders forty to a bunch, then head for the nearest processing station, which may be just a temporary-shed set up in the field. Here the stems are promptly boiled to seal in the milky fluid that will keep the poinsettia fresh.

In the big warehouse shed they get another, more drastic treatment. They are dunked, bloom and all, into an acid bath that cures them further. Then they stand in cool water

Paul Ecke (in shirt sleeves) doesn't do any of the cutting of his poinsettias, but he does all the calculating and worrying. Here he watches four runners and two cutters heading for the warehouse with their arms loaded with scarlet blossoms

Just-before-Christmas scene at Los Angeles wholesale flower market. That's Paul Ecke, Jr., in the sailor cap, and one of his pals back of the counter. Helping with poinsettia rush is popular holiday job with schoolboys in the vicinity



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