



Poinsettias Are More Than A Pretty Plant

UNH Professor Leads Class, Nation's Growers in Poinsettia Growing Trends

Contact: [Beth Potier](#)
603-862-1566
UNH Media Relations

Dec. 8, 2005

Note to editors: Link to photos at bottom of release.

DURHAM, N.H. -- For visitors to the University of New Hampshire's Whittemore Center this month, the 12-foot-tall tree of poinsettias in the lobby brings holiday cheer to winter's drear.

To the students of Plant Biology 547: Environmental Horticulture, those Kris Krinkle, Cortez Burgundy and Monet Twilight poinsettias they grew for the tree—as exotic and varied as their names—are a sort of living final exam.



And for their teacher, associate professor of plant biology Paul Fisher, they represent an opportunity to bring his teaching and research to the industry of growing the most popular potted flowering plant in the nation. Poinsettias represent more than \$250 million in annual sales.

“It’s a very good model crop from the point of view of teaching,” says Fisher, noting that poinsettias grow in about a semester and are fairly difficult to grow, making for an ideal curriculum. “And it’s a good plant for learning about greenhouse management. What we do here

becomes a model for other places around the country -- UNH develops poinsettia training and software products that are used in more than 20 other universities.”

The poinsettias in this winter’s display were grown as close as possible to organic standards. While poinsettias are unlikely to turn up in salad anytime soon (although their supposed toxicity to people and pets has been disproved), Fisher says that his students’ triumph in growing poinsettias without synthetic growing media, fertilizer, or pesticides means that the same greenhouse methods could be used with easier-to-grow food plants.

“I’m using the poinsettia crop as a proof of concept that you can actually grow a long-term greenhouse crop organically,” he says, adding, “No one’s been crazy enough to produce organic poinsettias before.” Fisher also notes that most greenhouse growers in New Hampshire are interested in taking selected technologies, such as biological control of pests, to apply in their

“conventional” crops. Developing environmentally-friendly approaches is important because greenhouse production is intensive: greenhouses apply 10 times the amount of fertilizer per acre as field crops.

Fisher, who holds a joint appointment as a UNH Cooperative Extension specialist in floriculture, says he “always looks for connections between research, teaching, and extension.” He has developed a software program, UNH FloraTrack, that helps hundreds of growers ensure their poinsettia crop is on track for timely holiday delivery, and he teaches his students some of the real-world lessons of professional growers.

The poinsettias give students in Environmental Horticulture course a hands-on education to the science of greenhouse plant production. Throughout the semester, they study the effects of environmental factors such as nutrition, light, and temperature on plant growth. The Whittemore Center poinsettia tree adds a sense of real-world responsibility to these budding growers, says Fisher.

“The quality of our students’ plants is something tens of thousands of people will see,” he says.

The poinsettia tree at UNH’s Whittemore Center, on display until December 19, is sponsored by the Anna and Raymond Tuttle Environmental Horticulture Fund, the UNH Cooperative Extension, the Department of Plant Biology, and the Thompson School of Applied Science.

Photo captions:

<http://www.unh.edu/news/img/colsa/poinsettiatree.jpg>

A 12-foot poinsettia tree, featuring a range of exotic poinsettias grown to organic standards by students in associate professor Paul Fisher’s Environmental Horticulture class, brightens UNH’s Whittemore Center this month. Photo courtesy UNH Media Relations.

<http://www.unh.edu/news/img/colsa/poinsettiacloseup.jpg>

Kris Krinkle is just one of the unusual poinsettias that decorate the poinsettia tree in the lobby of UNH’s Whittemore Center this month. All poinsettias were grown to organic standards by students in associate professor Paul Fisher’s Environmental Horticulture class. Photo courtesy UNH Media Relations.