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## What Color Is Your Poinsettia?

Classic Red Christmas Plant Gets a Psychedelic Makeover, Driving Some Purists Batty

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The painted poinsettia craze is spreading, and that's making purists see red.

This year, big-box stores, independent garden centers and supermarkets are offering poinsettias -- the potted plants long associated with Christmas -- that have been sprayed with pigments or dyes, dusted with glitter and even coated with metallic effects. These treatments, said to be harmless to the plants, turn the normally red, pink or white leaves into a riot of purple, blue, fuchsia, yellow, orange, silver or gold.

Some plants even feature polka dots, speckles or stripes, while others are coated with custom colors to match those of a football team or a homeowner's decor.

The emergence of painted poinsettias -- which began appearing in significant numbers in 2005 and have turned into a near-flood this year -- has created a rift in the garden world. Many consumers love them, despite prices that can be double those of plain versions of the holiday staple. "They're stunning," says Renée Leone of Blauvelt, N.Y., who bought several



multicolor poinsettias yesterday at the **Matterhorn Nursery** in Spring Valley, N.Y. "It's tradition with a modern twist -- not the same old poinsettia your grandmother had." The 44-year-old Ms. Leone says she'll keep a few for herself and give several as gifts.

But some traditionalists are aghast. They say adding artificial colors to a living, growing thing crosses the line. "I wouldn't want a dyed and/or glittered plant in my home or office even if it was free," says George C. Elliott, associate professor of horticulture at the University of Connecticut. Evelyn Peterson, an avid gardener in Orlando, Fla., says she considers decorated live plants "distorted and abused." The trend has stirred lively chatter online. "I imagine the people who buy those are the same people who buy colored chicks at Easter time," says one member of the GardenWeb site.

**Painted poinsettias vary from simple color schemes to wild patterns such as "Confetti."**

of plants speaks for itself," says Catherine Hipp, a vice president who oversees the Bronx, N.Y., garden store. Ditto for Pike Family Nurseries, which has 18 full-service garden centers in the Southeast. "We really don't think that's our customer," says Mike Chapman, Pike's director of consumer experience.

Yet unlike some other holiday decorating trends of recent years -- inflatable Santa lawn ornaments, home tree-trimming services -- this one has gone both mass-market and upmarket. While painted poinsettias can be found at Wal-Mart, they also have been embraced by a number of upscale garden centers, which consider them an artistic way to reinvigorate a plant that some consider a year-end cliché.

**Noah Schwartz, head grower at Matterhorn Nursery's** two elaborate stores, says he was hesitant at first about the concept of painting poinsettias. "I'm a horticulturist," he says. "I laughed at it and said, 'No way.'" But . Schwartz since has come around, and sales so far this season of the 22 color schemes **Matterhorn** offers have doubled from last year. (Among them: Purple Ice, Blue Striped and a multicolor concoction called Confetti.)

Many consumers love painted poinsettias, despite prices that can be double those of plain versions of the holiday staple. Mr. Schwartz sees augmenting nature's own hues as a way to address his industry's chief problem: a decline in interest in gardening and plants among younger consumers. "We need to have something distinctive," he says. Instead of visiting a garden center, "our young customer is going to an Apple store."

Painted poinsettias are in more stores this season and in greater quantities. Lowe's Cos. has boosted inventories of decorated poinsettias "across the board" and the plants are "extremely popular among our customers," says a spokeswoman for the home-improvement chain, declining to give figures. Home Depot Inc. similarly has expanded availability this season. And one of the companies that sells the dyes and glitter to growers, Fred C. Gloeckner & Co. of Harrison, N.Y., has seen sales surge fivefold since it launched its Fantasy Colors line three years ago, says Andrew Lee, vice president of sales and marketing.



Gloeckner now."

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year, they have become practically a giveaway item at some retailers. A painted poinsettia in a 6-inch pot can go for \$20 or more at some garden centers, compared to \$10 or less for an undecorated one.

The decorated plants carry higher margins than undecorated ones, says Greg Ward, co-owner of Ward's Nursery & Garden Center in Great Barrington, Mass., and their unusual look has helped perk up sales in November, before many people think about Christmas decorating.

Growers and retailers aren't stopping with poinsettias. Some garden centers this fall sold pots of chrysanthemums that were sprayed with orange and other tones. Others, including some Home Depot stores, are selling Norfolk Island pines, a common houseplant, decorated with glitter. And at a major horticultural expo in Europe last month, one exhibitor showed decorative kale, a cabbage-like garden plant, sprayed fuchsia, bright blue or red and sprinkled with glitter.

The trend is likely to continue as the garden industry hunts for new ways to juice up sales, which have sagged in the past few years. Painted plants fit into the industry's goal of getting consumers to view potted flowers as disposable decorations that they should change seasonally. (Many consumers already put poinsettias in that category.)

Ball Horticultural Co., a major plant-industry supplier, is promoting the idea of having growers spray-paint potted plants for Valentine's Day, Easter, Mother's Day and the Fourth of July, says Michael Schoen, who manages Ball's plant-coloring line, called Ball Bling. Home Depot, for one, finds the idea intriguing. Says Dan Stuppiello, who oversees plant sales at 240 Home Depots in New England and New York, "It could open up a whole new avenue for different holidays."