

Poinsettias have rich Mexican history, rooted in Aztec ritual

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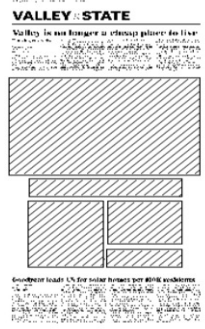
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Poinsettias, or flor de Nochebuena, are native to central Mexico.

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Flower shops may sell poinsettias in varying colors today, but Perla Perez only recognizes the astral-shaped blooms in the original scarlet vibrancy her mother and grandmother harvested in Mexico.

“The original is the red color. And from there, there was a special harvest to derive other colors,” said Perez, a Phoenix florist whose shop, Chica Flowers, located on East McDowell Road near Grand Canal Trail, sells the plant on special order.

A Christmas staple in the U.S., poinsettias are native to central Mexico and were used there for centuries in rituals by the Indigenous peoples and Spanish colonists alike.

Perez knows the poinsettia as flor de Nochebuena, which translates to Holy Night flower, just as the plant is commonly called throughout Mexico. Franciscan friars in Mexico in the 1600s named the star-resembling plants because of their growth near Christmas. They used them in religious decor and to evangelize the Indigenous, according to a Dec. 22, 2021, Library of Congress blog post.

For centuries before the Spaniards, the Nahuatl, the indigenous central Mexico people that included the Aztecs, knew the plant as cuetlaxóchitl (pronounced “kwet-la-sho-shel”), or flower that withers, according to the Library of Congress post. Legend has it the Aztecs harvested them for use in war rituals and medicinal purposes, among other uses, the post explained.

The plant gained popularity abroad in the early 19th century after the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett, cultivated the flor de Nochebuena and inspired its English name, according to the Library of Congress post.

The 45-year-old Perez remembers as a child how her mother filled their Sinaloa, Mexico, home with the red blooms as Christmastime approached. Her mother was continuing the tradition of decorating with the flor de Nochebuena from her mother, a Mayan woman whose family hailed from the Yucatán peninsula.

Perez pointed out how the poinsettia's natural red color has been

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manipulated through light exposure to turn it into different colors like pink, yellow and white.

An assistant director of public horticulture at the Desert Botanical Garden, Angelica Elliott explained that the poinsettia's small flower is surrounded not by ruby petals, but by the red-colored bract, the prominent leafy part of the plant.

For the bract to achieve its color, the plant needs to be in 12-14 hours of darkness, she detailed.

"If they don't have that, then they're not gonna flower," she said. "We consider them as annuals, or bedding plants, because they don't really tolerate our summer times, but they're really a great plant to use during the holi-

days for that seasonal color."

There are about 600 red poinsettias filling the grounds during the garden's festive Las Noches de las Luminarias event, Elliott said. The annual holiday attraction runs through Dec. 31 and includes a courtyard display consisting of 300-400 poinsettias to resemble a conical-shaped Christmas tree.

A distinctive poinsettia arrangement this year at the garden lays at the foot of the renowned late Colombian artist Fernando Botero's 1999 sculpture, "Reclining Woman." Elliott said the temporarily placed red flora makes for a "striking" visual paired with the robust black matte piece displayed at the garden through March 31.



Poinsettias form a tree-like display at the Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix on Dec. 15. PHOTOS BY DIANNIE CHAVEZ/THE REPUBLIC



Poinsettias adorn artist Fernando Botero's "Reclining Woman" sculpture at the Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix on Dec. 15. DIANNIE CHAVEZ/THE REPUBLIC