

Poinsettia Pointers

➤ NOVEMBER is a critical time for poinsettias. Whether this festive plant will lend its flaming red bracts to the brightness of the Christmas season depends largely on how well it is spared certain pre-Christmas hazards.

Poinsettia goes by a variety of names:

Christmas Flower, Easter Flower, Lobster Flower, Mexican Flame-Leaf. It grows wild in moist, shady areas of Mexico and Central America. In the tropics poinsettia gets short days and long nights. In the home, with electric lights and our modern habits of staying up long past the sun's bedtime, we are not likely without special effort to supply the natural rhythm of light and dark which brings out the best in the poinsettia.

To bring out this best, home-growers of poinsettia place the plant by a window so that it will get the maximum of November daylight. At night they cover the plant with a dark cloth, in much the same way that a canary might be put to sleep for the night.

Poinsettia, in addition to being light-sensitive, is very susceptible to extremes of heat and cold. For this reason, another far-sighted precaution is to maintain an even temperature in the room. Draughts or sudden temperature drops may cause the foliage to drop. Weekly applications of liquid manure are also helpful.

Of all these measures to induce the bright-

est display by Christmas, the most important is the regulation of light. Scientists of the U. S. Department of Agriculture have found that as little as an hour's exposure to minute quantities of light nightly for three weeks is enough to prevent flowering.

The red bracts of poinsettia are actually one of the two kinds of leaf that the plant produces. The other, of course, is the glossy dark green leaf that contrasts with the bracts in the traditional cheerful Yuletide colors. The flowers proper are tiny club-shaped objects at the center of the red bracts.

There is a large group of plants that share this distinctive manner of flowering which goes under the botanical name, euphorbia. One of these, a thorny type that is plentiful in Palestine and in the Mediterranean region, is prominent in the Christmas tradition of England. This is the famous Glastonbury thorn, reputed to be the staff of Joseph of Arimethea which he planted on the site of Glastonbury Abbey, and said to blossom only at Christmastide.

Science News Letter, November 12, 1949

GEOLOGY

Study Coral Reef Origin

➤ MUCH battered Bikini, the A-bomb atoll in the Pacific, may once more become a proving ground, but this time to test out various geologic theories of the origin of coral reefs.

By drilling a hole 7,000 to 10,000 feet deep into the coral foundation, geologists hope to solve the mystery of the origin of such formations concerning which several conflicting explanations have been advanced since 1820 when coral reefs were first observed scientifically.

If funds needed in addition to those already offered by the Geological Society of America and the Office of Naval Research can be raised to finance the project, Dr. H. S. Ladd and J. I. Tracey, Jr., of the U. S. Geological Survey, believe that much more will be gained besides the settlement of the 130-year old controversy. Such a deep-drilled hole, they write in the SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY (Nov.), "would give valuable information on many fundamental geologic problems," among them the composition of the strata and the kinds of animal and plant life that inhabited the region ages ago.

Although all scientists agree that coral is the limestone skeleton of one of the lowliest creatures of the animal kingdom which slowly builds up into large formations over long periods of time, they have been unable to agree, Dr. Ladd and Mr. Tracey say, on an explanation of how these coral islands could grow so enormous as to project above the level of the sea.

Charles Darwin, the great 19th century founder of the theory of evolution, believed that coral reefs and atolls have formed on land that is slowly sinking into the sea. Carl Semper, a contemporary of Darwin,

proposed the contrary view that the foundation of coral isles was slowly rising from the ocean bottom. In 1910 R. A. Daly suggested that during the Ice Ages the sea was much lower and the coral began to form when the banks were close to sea level.

Although modern students of the problem have gained much knowledge of coral structure by extensive geophysical, chemical and magnetic surveys, Dr. Ladd and Mr. Tracey point out that they still do not have enough evidence to decide which of the conflicting theories is correct.

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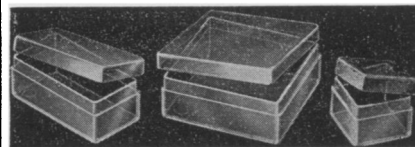
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