The Flower of Christmas Eve,
The History of the Poinsettia
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Colorful and eventful describes the long history of the poinsettia, from Aztec kings to humble mangers to adorning our halls makes an amazing story.

The poinsettia's interesting history starts, but does not begin, with how it obtained it's biological name, *Euphorbia Pulcherrima*. One day a German botanist was working in his greenhouse when he discovered a luscious beautiful red blossom peering at him from beneath the floor. Upon seeing this lovely flower, he shouted "Euphorbia pulcherrima": "the most beautiful euphorbia" or simply "The most beautiful".

This bright crimson flower, in Mexico, has many different tales associated with it. One story told in Cuernavaca, a very small town somewhat south of Mexico City is the story of a poor small boy who, like everyone else, desired to bring a gift to the Christ child on Christmas Eve. As he walked towards the Church, an angel appeared and instructed him to pick the white weeds from the roadside, which he did. When the flowers were placed into the Christ's child's manger on Christmas Eve, they became the vibrant crimson blossom: the poinsettia.

Another, similar, story told in a different part of Mexico is the story of a poor small girl who, also, picks white weeds from along the road. Upon arriving at the Cathedral, she places the carefully arranged bouquet into the Christ's child's manger on Christmas Eve and they became the lovely bright red poinsettia.

The Mexican people view the poinsettia as a symbol of the Holy Star of Bethlehem. A star led the Magi, by Christian tradition as they traveled many miles across the desert in search of the
Christ child. The star helped the shepherds and others find the Christ child. The tiny bright yellow flowers in the center are then encompassed with bright red leaves, or bracts, which look like stars.

This incredible flower would have, probably, remained unknown except for one very remarkable gentleman named Dr. Joel Roberts Poinsett who was the first United States ambassador appointed by John Quincy Adams to Mexico from 1825-1829. Being the son of a French doctor, Dr. Poinsett also attended medical school but found his real love in the study of plants. In 1828, while exploring the intriguing countryside of Mexico he discovered an unique shrub with large red flowers. He obtained cuttings, sent them to his greenhouse in South Carolina where he started growing them. He proceeded to present friends with gifts of these amazing flowers. Even though Dr. Poinsett will be remembered as the founder of the Smithsonian Institute he will, always, be known as the discoverer of the plant that now bears his name.

Mr. William Prescott, a noted horticulturist was asked to give a biological name to this beautiful flower as its fame grew. In honor of its greatest fan, he named it *Poinsettia pulcherrima* for Dr. Joel Poinsett.

Montezuma, the last Aztec king, ordered large caravans of the bountiful, magnificent crimson-topped shrubs brought to the capital, Mexico City. However, the luxurious plants were too delicate to be grown at that climate or altitude. The Aztecs used the "Cuetloxochitl", which is what they called poinsettias, in the 14th -15th centuries for making a type of reddish-purple dye. The flower was considered a symbol of purity. In the 17th century some Franciscan monks in Mexico became using poinsettias for the Fiesta of Santa Pesebre: a nativity procession. This is the first know association of the flower with Christmas.

This Christmas, as we enjoy our displays of poinsettias, let us take a moment to think back on the long history of these lovely plants. The graceful halls of Aztec Kings, humble mangers and simple stalls, to our beloved homes, may they continue to bring us *Euphorbia pulcherrima*.

For some interesting reading about poinsettias and their history, read the following web pages:
http://urbanext.illinois.edu/poinsettia/index.cfm
http://www.plantmanagementnetwork.org/pub/php/review/xmasflower/.

For information on growing poinsettias, see: http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/EP/EP34900.pdf