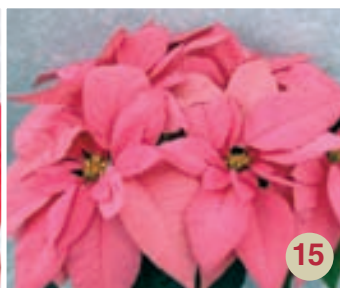
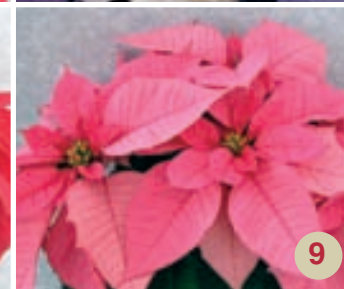
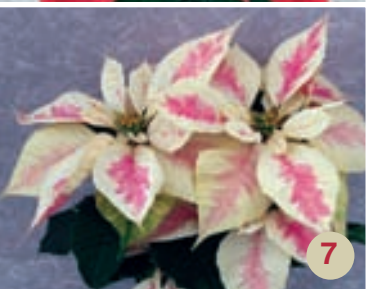




NATIONAL POINSETTIA TRIALS



1. 'Carousel Dark Red'
2. 'Christmas Angel Marble'
3. 'Christmas Angel Pink'
4. 'Christmas Angel Red'
5. 'Christmas Angel White'
6. 'Christmas Feelings Cinnamon'
7. 'Christmas Feelings Marble'
8. 'Christmas Feelings Merlot'
9. 'Christmas Feelings Pink'
10. 'Christmas Feelings White'
11. 'Christmas Feelings Select'
12. 'Freedom Early Red'
13. 'Freedom Early White'
14. 'Christmas Feelings'
15. 'Classic Pink'
16. 'Classic Red'
17. 'Classic White'
18. 'Freedom Early Pink'
19. 'Ice Punch'
20. 'Mars Red'
21. 'Polar Bear'

By Jim Barrett, John Dole and Roberto Lopez

The National Poinsettia Cultivar Trials are conducted at North Carolina State University, Purdue University, the University of Florida and Homewood Nursery in Raleigh, N.C., in cooperation with the major poinsettia breeder companies and, this year, the University of Connecticut, which submitted cultivars for an independent critique.

Of the 113 cultivars in this year's trials, each location picked the 10 cultivars that performed best for them. The 12 cultivars selected at two or more locations were designated as Best of Trials for 2008.

The individual locations base their selection for best cultivars on a range of characteristics, including consumer reactions, plant appearance and ease of production. An important consideration for a newer cultivar is often whether or not it fills an industry need in terms of uniqueness, color and/or finish timing. Many of the newer cultivars are excellent but not distinctly better than existing cultivars. The quality of cultivars introduced in the past several years has steadily increased, and it is more difficult for a breeder to produce new cultivars that are distinct improvements or noticeably different.

'Ice Punch' was picked at all four trial sites and is the clear "winner" for the 2008 trials. The Classic series, 'Premium Picasso' and 'Prestige Early Red' were selected at three of the four locations. 'Polar Bear' and 'Pink Candy' were the only two standalone new cultivars to make the

Best of Trials list. Other new cultivars on the list are three new colors in the Christmas Angel series and two new colors in the Christmas Feelings series.

Cultivar Descriptions

'Ice Punch': This cultivar has the potential to be a significant novelty variety in higher-end markets for several years. 'Ice Punch' was also selected to the Best of 2006 Trials list. It is no longer in an exclusive marketing program and is available to all growers for 2009. The bracts' unique color pattern appeals strongly to consumers — who rated it the top novelty at all three university trial sites — and the plant is best used in some type of upgraded package or program. Growers should be aware that 'Ice Punch' requires some special handling in production: It tends to start off a little slower, and rooted cuttings should not dry out before planting. It needs a little extra care to get off to a good start. Once established, it can be a strong grower and is less sensitive to PGRs than most other cultivars. It can be difficult to hold down if temperatures are warm, and the plants are a little crowded.

However, if planted a little late and temperatures are cool, it may not fill in to make a nice plant.

Classic series: This new series with Red, White and Pink cultivars was introduced last year. As the name implies, the plants have more of a classic poinsettia appearance with big centers, a large number of cyathia

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and long, narrow bracts. Finish timing is early midseason. This series was developed for use in larger containers and is more vigorous than most other poinsettia cultivars. Because of Classic's vigor, growers will need to make sure they keep the plants under control. The bract color for Pink is average for dark-leaf poinsettias, but White is quite cream colored, even for dark-leaf varieties.

'Premium Picasso': 'Premium Picasso' has made the Best of Trials list for three consecutive years. Its distinctive characteristic is that the bract colors and pattern are generally similar to 'Monet Twilight'. However, 'Premium Picasso' is easier to grow and finishes earlier than 'Monet Twilight'. Picasso also holds together better during handling. Because of its low vigor, it is more difficult to produce larger plant sizes with 'Premium Picasso'. As with 'Monet Twilight' and other cultivars with highly variegated bracts, there can be considerable variation and reversion in a population of 'Premium Picasso'.

'Prestige Early Red': While 'Prestige Red' has made the Best of Trials list in the past, this is the first time for 'Prestige Early Red'. The two cultivars are quite similar in general appearance, leaf and bract color, and growth habit. They set the standard in terms of branch strength among mainstream red poinsettia cultivars, but there are important differences between the two cultivars. 'Prestige Early Red' is a little less vigorous and less PGR is needed. In most areas of the country, 'Prestige Early Red' is an early-flowering variety — 10 days or more ahead of 'Prestige Red'. In 2008, when all cultivars tended to finish early, some growers were surprised at how early 'Prestige Early Red' flowered. The significance of 'Prestige Early Red' is its versatility and plant strength as an early-flowering cultivar. It also has been successfully tested at several universities (including Purdue) for cold-finish production and will be useful for growers who adopt this technique.

'Carousel Dark Red': This is two years running for 'Carousel Dark Red' on the list, and it has established such a strong position in the market that the original 'Carousel Red' is being discontinued. 'Carousel Dark Red' is a good novelty red cultivar with an early finish. It also has better color than 'Carousel Red' and is an exceptionally sturdy plant. Growers doing 'Carousel Dark Red' for the first time should be aware of its low vigor and longer crop time. This cultivar responds well to fasciation treatments, if needed. Note that 'Car-

ousel Pink' is more vigorous and flowers later compared to 'Carousel Dark Red'.

Christmas Angel series: 'Christmas Angel Red' was introduced two years ago, and White, Marble and Pink are available for 2009. The plants are well suited for large containers and early finish, and the plants have strong, upright stems and good vigor. It is a good uniform series, and the bract color for the Marble and Pink cultivars are among the best for dark-leaf poinsettias. 'Christmas Angel Red' was successfully cold finished in Purdue studies.

Christmas Feelings series: This series has become well established as an important mid-season, uniform series. Colors are Red, Pink, White and Marble. 'Christmas Feelings Cinnamon' and 'Christmas Feelings Merlot' are good additions. The bract colors are very good for dark-leaf types. The Christmas Feelings series is easy to grow and has low/medium vigor. 'Christmas Feelings Red' performed well in the Purdue cold-finished studies.

Freedom Early series: The general appearance of the Freedom Early series is similar to the Freedom series. The colors in the Freedom Early series are Red, White, Pink and Marble. The series is important because it flowers early and offers a range of colors with Freedom's characteristic large bract size and solid canopy of color. The series will be significant for growers shifting to cold-finish programs.

'Mars Red': 'Mars Red' made last year's Best of Trials as well. Among red poinsettias, it has a unique appearance that could be seen as the opposite of Freedom Early. 'Mars Red' finishes with smaller bracts arranged in a flat plane across the top of the plant. It has a strong, upright habit and good vigor and is an attractive larger plant. There are several colors in the series — Pink, White and Marble — that match the midseason finish of 'Mars Red'. 'Mars Pink' is particularly nice with bright-pink bracts.

'Pink Candy': This is a new peppermint type with dark-pink bracts and tiny, darker pink flecks. The plants have good branching, large leaves and bracts, and a good habit. While this is a standalone cultivar, the peppermint types are popular, and the colors of this cultivar are among the brightest of the group. It displays well under fluorescent lighting.

'Polar Bear': This is another new cultivar that is a standout in a crowded category. Among the many white poinsettias, 'Polar Bear' is distinctive: The bright white bracts do not create a solid cover, and the transition bracts with bright green veins show through. Plants are generally upright with medium

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- 22. 'Pink Candy'
- 23. 'Premium Red'
- 24. 'Premium Picasso'
- 25. 'Prestige Early Red'

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vigor. A portion of the proceeds goes to Polar Bears International, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the worldwide conservation of the polar bear. This story could be useful in marketing programs for independent garden centers.

'Premium Red': The Premium series has become an annual member of this list. 'Premium Red' is suited for a range of climates, and its use is expanding. The plants are strong with large leaves and large, flat bracts. 'Premium Red' has low vigor and works well in 6½-inch and smaller sizes, but larger plants are possible under adequate crop time. The Premium series has the broadest range of colors of any series and includes an expanding group of novelties, such as Picasso mentioned above. 'Premium Red' matures early and is being evaluated in cool-finish programs.

Acknowledgements

The National Poinsettia Trials are a unique program with coordination among multiple locations, which would not be possible without the financial support of the breeder companies. The information gained from Homewood Nursery's participation is important to the evaluation of the cultivars. We wish to recognize the efforts of the support staff at each university who produce the crops as well as students who work in the trials.

We hope the National Poinsettia Trial program is useful for the grower community, and we appreciate any feedback and suggestions. GPN

John Dole is professor of floriculture at North Carolina State University. Jim Barrett is professor of floriculture at University of Florida. Robert Lopez is assistant professor of horticulture and floriculture extension specialist at Purdue University. They can be reached at john_dole@ncsu.edu, jbarrett@ufl.edu and rglopez@purdue.edu, respectively.

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Growing Media Handling Guide

Properly handling growing media can reduce shrink, produce healthier crops and improve profits.

By Laurent Boudreau, Harold Fonda, Jamie Gibson, Hugh Poole, Bob Steinkamp and Michael Tilley

Growing media can be a large component of a grower's production costs. Improper mix handling and poor cultural practices can result in decreased plant quality and, ultimately, an increase in shrink. There is no room for shrink in today's changing economy. The growing medium must have the right combination of physical and chemical properties, and it must be properly handled. The information presented is primarily directed toward small- and medium-sized growers who purchase prepackaged professional growing mixes, but the principles apply to all growers, including those with their own mixing facilities.

Proper media handling can be summed up with one objective: Avoid compaction of the growing mix. The two most important physical properties of a mix are air space and container capacity. Together, these equal total porosity. Ideal air space for greenhouse propagation mixes ideally should be in the 10- to 15- percent range, while greenhouse production mixes typically are within the 15- to 25- percent range. Perennial and nursery crops often have air space values greater than 25 percent. Container capacity values vary but usually fall within the 65- to 80- percent range; therefore, total porosity values are normally in the 75- to 95- percent range.

Some growing media manufacturers may produce soils several months before they are used, so focused attention to the physical structure and chemical composition of potting soils is paramount. Commercial mixes contain standard materials like peat, perlite, vermiculite and aged/composted pine bark that provide porosity, yet hold moisture (usually a set range of moisture between 45 and 55 percent), so the method in which they are blended and packaged can impact physical properties like bulk density (weight per volume). Inquire with your mix supplier as to how quality-control standards are maintained prior to your receipt of the mix.

On-Site Inspection

Upon receiving commercial mixes, inspect the quality of the packages to ensure that excessive moisture has not penetrated into the mix. Most pallets will be covered with shrink wrap and draped with black plastic to avoid rainfall from entering the mix. Overly saturated mixes can

bog down the pot-filling equipment and introduce weight that poses a safety hazard to greenhouse workers lifting bags. Tiny perforations on the bag surface allow excess air to be squeezed out during palletization and create a tighter and safer pallet during movements.

An on-site inspection of the mix is sometimes appropriate, especially for new customers, to observe the physical makeup of the growing mix. Ask these questions: Is it the mix you ordered? Are you pleased with the quality of the components? Are there any signs of fungal growth or mold on the mix? Sometimes odd smells can come from commercial mixes because of excessive moisture combined with natural biological activity.

Proper Storage

Once the mix has been removed from the delivery truck, ensure the mix has been properly stored. Sometimes algae builds up within the layers of shrink wrap and can give a false impression of the mix's quality. Most pallets are capped with black plastic and shrink wrapped, so the less light that can be provided to the packages, the better.

Some growers who do not have facilities for mix storage will cover the entire soil load with opaque tarps. If growers store mix longer than six to eight months in full sun, weathering of the wrapping material and a reduction in wetting-agent efficacy may occur. Long-term storage under extreme conditions can make a mix difficult to wet. If such conditions exist, test the mix for wettability before potting. Avoid placing heavy items on top of the pallets that would compress and compact the mix.

Storing the mix in a dry, low-light environment is always best. If the environment can be controlled, try to keep the temperature between 40 and 70° F, especially when using biologicals and controlled-release fertilizers that are sensitive to temperature extremes. Mixes should not be stored in greenhouses during production for fear of accidental wetting, adult fungus gnat movement into bags and reduced wetting agent efficacy from extreme heat. ▀



Top: When dibbling, try to avoid compressing the mix. Above: When filling by hand, place an excess amount in the container, compress or tap gently, and sweep to rim level. Below: Equipment adjustments should be made prior to running flats through the system.

