

Poinsettias Southwestern style

by Joli A. Shaw

Phoenix and Albuquerque: mass-market control and finicky year-round gardeners

The Southwest is one of the fastest growing areas for home building in the nation, and mass marketers have been quick to key in on its potential. For consumers in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Phoenix, Arizona, gardening is an art, in part due to the year-round opportunities their climate affords as well as the blandness of the desert landscape. Home centers in particular have been successful in these markets as homeowners look for ways to brighten yards, flower beds and front porches. Still, each of these two markets have nuances that make poinsettia production challenging.

Albuquerque. Albuquerque has been a dumping ground for mass markets, growers say. Like many Western markets, in Albuquerque guaranteed sales have increased costs while making prices more competitive. Even so, prices in Albuquerque are high compared to the rest of the nation, with wholesale prices for a 6½-in. pinched plant averaging \$5.75.

Chains control the majority of the retail plant sales markets, and independent garden centers are few and far between. One of the exceptions, Rowland's, has survived through dedication to customer service and consumer education, offering many educational seminars, maintaining good signage and keeping floors heavily staffed.

High latitude and high light make growing a challenge, particularly with the newer early varieties. Preventing stretch is foremost on many growers' minds. Weather can be a particular

challenge, with temperatures shooting over 100F or dropping into the 20s with snow, as when we visited.

The 1997 selling season was one of the earliest yet, growers say, beginning in early to mid-November for some. Cloudy weather may have contributed to the early start, spurring consumers to think about holidays and being indoors earlier than in most years.

Phoenix. Like Albuquerque, Phoenix is mass market controlled. In particular, consumers turn to home centers for plants. One grower estimates that Home Depot controls at least 50% of retail sales in the area.

Because of the mass market competition, price is a serious issue in this area. Dominated by the 5½-in. pinched plant, the Phoenix poinsettia market has been flat for five years or more, growers say. The 4-in. poinsettia market has all but disappeared in the wake of mass marketers buying 5½-in. plants for as low as \$2.75.

The Phoenix area is booming, with the population in the valley growing and plant sales growing with them. A recent *American Demographics* article pinpointed the Southwest as the best job market in the country.

Also like Albuquerque, temperatures in Phoenix can vary drastically, and consumers can see 20 to 30F differences between day and night temperatures. Still, frost isn't common, and gardening continues nearly year-round. Consequently, Phoenix gardeners are picky, and growers have to produce many varieties and sizes to keep them interested.



Business: Alameda Greenhouses Inc.
Location: Albuquerque, New Mexico
Size: 1 acre
Number of poinsettias grown: 7,800
Customer base: Fundraisers, retail florists
Pictured: Steve Skinner, owner

After working at Alameda Greenhouses for 10 years, Steve Skinner bought the business in 1996. His poinsettia crop is primarily pinched plants, and his reds include Supjibi, V-14 Glory Red and Success, which he particularly likes for its large bract size, late timing and medium green foliage color. Color and novelties he produces (40% of his crop) include Peterstar Marble, Marblestar, Noblestar, Monet, V-14 Jingle Bells, Nutcracker White and Nutcracker Pink. Steve doesn't use much height control on his crop—he doesn't need it with Albuquerque's high light and latitude. "My best height control is high light and high nutrition," he says. Business has been good, Steve says—he saw a 15 to 20% increase this year. He's charging \$5.50 for a 6½-in. pinched plant and was oversold.



Business: Corrales Road Greenhouses
Location: Albuquerque, New Mexico
Size: 120,000 sq. ft. at two locations
Number of poinsettias grown: 58,000
Customer base: 95% retail florists
Pictured: Ray Giese Jr., owner

Customers at Corrales Road Greenhouses ask for Lilo by name, so Ray Giese Jr. has responded, producing almost all of his hanging baskets in this variety. For his 6-in. crop, he prefers Freedom Red, which he lights to time to his preference.

His crop breakdown is targeted for his retail florist customers' high end markets: 75% red, 15% white and the remainder in pinks and novelties. Varieties produced include Angelika White and Pink, Monet, Candy Cane, Jingle Bells 3 and Maren. Still, Ray says, he's not growing enough colors. He's been sold out of them since June and plans to increase his ratio next year.

Selling primarily for retail florists, he produces higher end products such as 8-in. combination bowls with ferns and a 4-in. pixie poinsettia.

POINSETTIAS '97



Business: Rowland Nursery Farms
Location: Albuquerque, New Mexico
Size: 500,000 sq. ft. of greenhouse space at two locations
Number of poinsettias grown: 10,000
Customer base: Five Rowland's retail locations
Pictured: Dan McBride, assistant growing manager; Tina Quintana, growing manager

People shopping the five Rowland's garden center locations

that Rowland Nursery Farms supplies want more red this year, says head grower Tina Quintana. Production is now about $\frac{2}{3}$ red and $\frac{1}{3}$ colors, but this year consumers seem to be moving back to traditional reds, and they're especially getting into the dark-leaved varieties.

Most of Tina's crop is 6-in. pinched plants, and she's growing eight red varieties: V-14, Cortez, Freedom, Peace Jolly Red, Petoy, Picacho, Supjibi and Success. Colors and novelties include Maren, Darlyne, V-14 Pink, Cortez Pink, Monet (very popular), Sonora Jingle Bells, Marblestar and V-17 Marble.

Shipping began particularly early this year, with an enormous craft show, Holiday Olé, in early November. Tina targets Rowland's high-end customers with products like the Santa Fe bowl, which is a tri-color planted in an 8-in. shallow bowl with a pedestal.

Business: Swenson's Wholesale
Location: Laveen, Arizona
Size: 220,000 sq. ft.
Number of poinsettias grown: 140,000
Customer base: Mass marketers
Pictured: Carl Swenson, owner

"Most people say they don't make money on poinsettias," says Carl Swenson. "We do."

How does he do it, particularly when selling to mass marketers? Simply put, space efficiency. Growing $5\frac{1}{2}$ -in. plants on 8-in. centers, Carl uses every bit of his greenhouse space, even putting boards over the aisles between benches and growing plants on them.

"We get $3\frac{1}{2}$ times as many plants in the greenhouse as [people putting plants on 15-in. centers]," says Carl. "We make \$9.60 on a 15 by 15 where they're turning \$4 out of the same space."

Though he won't reveal his wholesale price, he did tell us that big boxes in the area are selling his plants for \$2.97.

Carl's production this year is all Fischer varieties for the first time. He's growing Cortez and Sonora for reds (85% of the crop) and Sonora Pink, White, Jingle Bells and Marble. Little height control is necessary, he says, as "the plants are naturally compact." To control growth, he uses Cycocel and B-Nine if necessary and backs out of fertilizer in mid-November.



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POINSETTIAS '97

Photos: Jodi A. Shaw



Business: McK Greenhouses Inc.
Location: Mesa, Arizona
Size: 38 acres at three locations
Number of poinsettias grown: 350,000
Customer base: Mainly mass marketers
Pictured: Ken Williams, owner; Mark Williams, grower

Production at McK

Greenhouses is mass-market oriented, with a few surprises thrown in, such as the 8-in. poinsettia trees they grow for the few people who want better product, says Ken Williams. Another eye-catcher: preplanted dusty miller color bowls with a 5 1/2-in. pot in the middle so consumers can drop in whatever plant they like, such as a poinsettia during the holidays.

The poinsettia crop at McK is primarily red—they grow only 20% color. Reds include Freedom Red, Sonora and Cortez, which grower Mark Williams says “is always a plate topper,” providing very uniform blooms. Colors include Freedom Marble, Jingle Bells, Pink and White.

Volume has increased along with the population of the valley, and Ken is building on a new location in Queen Creek, Arizona. Eventually, he plans to produce poinsettias exclusively there and at his Prescott location.

Business: Harper's Nursery and Flower Shop
Location: Mesa, Arizona
Size: 13,000 sq. ft.
Number of poinsettias grown: 8,000
Customer base: Their own four Harper's retail stores
Pictured: Jay Harper, owner (left); Dave Ahrends, grower



It's a statement on Phoenix's favorable climate but more so on Harper's quality plants that in May a satisfied customer sent Jay Harper a photo of a plant he bought during winter 1996. The plant, Jay says, “looked as good as it did when he bought it.”

Grower Dave Ahrends produces plants for Harper's four retail locations in the Phoenix area.

Much of Harper's market is in bigger material such as 14-in. tubs, which they were already sold out of in mid-December. Their customers are willing to pay for them because they know they'll last. Price for a 6-in. pinched poinsettia is \$11.50. An added bonus: Harper's sends out printed care sheets with each plant they sell.

Eighty percent of the crop is red, primarily Freedom. Colors include Freedom Pink, White and Marble and Pink Peppermint and Jingle Bells 3.

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POINSETTIAS '97



Business: Willow Creek Greenhouses
Location: Desert Hills, Arizona; Chino Valley, Arizona
Size: 30 acres
Number of poinsettias grown: 64,000
Customer base: Mass marketers, resorts, interiorscapers, rewholesalers, independents
Pictured: Dave Hirt, general manager of operations & sales

Thanks to construction of a new, high-efficiency greenhouse, poinsettia production at Willow Creek Greenhouses, one of *GrowerTalks* top eight best-run businesses for 1997, has increased 20% this year. The new house features rolling benches, retractable shade, anti-condensate plastic and Lennox heaters with tubular heat exchangers. Six-in. poinsettias are watered with disposable drip tape at a cost of only \$0.005 per pot.

Production includes Freedom Red, V-17 Marble and White, Jingle Bells 3, Monet and Celebrate II Pink. Sizes include 6½ in., 10 in. and a few 4 in. Most of the crop is red.

Plants are produced to be high end. Six and a half in. poinsettias are grown on 15 by 17 in. spacing and sold at about \$5.50. In addition to resorts, interiorscapers and rewholesalers, a small portion of plants goes to mass marketers.

Business: Gardener's World
Location: Phoenix, Arizona
Size: about 40 acres
Number of poinsettias grown: More than 28,000
Customer base: Their own garden center, resorts, hotels
Pictured: Gary Petterson, owner

Think poinsettias in Phoenix, and you think Gardener's World, famous for The Poinsettia Festival, which

owner Gary Petterson started 12 years ago. Held the first weekend of December, it includes a tree decorating contest for school groups, vignettes set up for family holiday portraits, a professional photographer and an amazing selection of high quality poinsettia products.

Their selection includes 4-ft. and 6-ft. tall trees, an 8-in. mini tree as well as a variety of pot sizes ranging from 4 in. to 14 in. Centerpieces and hanging baskets are also an important part of their selection. Another popular product is a 16-in. preplanted color bowl with a 6-in. pot in the middle to interchange plants. Their signature choice for the outside ring of plants: variegated Swedish ivy—what an impact!

Reds grown include Subjibi, Freedom, Peto and Peptide. Colors include Silverstar, Marblestar, Pink Peppermint, Monet, Freedom Pink and Freedom White. Production is approximately 60 to 65% red.



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