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A Christmas Postmortem

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Season's Greetings are obviously well beyond their Best By dates, but deadlines being what they are, what's in my windshield is in your rearview mirror. Here's a quick visit from the Ghost of Christmas Just Past.

It dawned on me in late December that I hadn't seen any painted poinsettias. Admittedly, I hadn't looked for them, but one usually doesn't have to; they're not exactly subtle. Hmmm, are they still a thing anymore? Naturally, I Googled that question because delayed gratification isn't a thing anymore.

One of the first hits was a Facebook post from Smith's Gardentown in Wichita Falls, Texas, declaring they won't sell painted *Euphorbia pulcherrima*; they prefer to honor the breeders who create multiple hues by natural, laborious means. But they can't (yet) make blue or purple bracts; the plant's chemistry doesn't allow it. Paint is apparently a cheater's shortcut to that end of the spectrum.

It makes sense, given the setting: Wichita Falls is named for a waterfall that was erased by a flood in the 1800s. A century later, the city replaced it with a man-made, 54-ft. replica cataract, currently closed indefinitely for repairs. A laborious solution, but I suppose it beats giving up and renaming the town. That, you could do with paint.

Clearly, this wasn't a job for the internet alone, so I visited two retailers to see what evidence remained on December 27. At the blue-dominated box store, I found a few dozen still-healthy poinsettias, all one size, marked down 75%. Crews were busily redacting all other signs of the spent season that had occupied thousands of square feet since Halloween. The remaining plants would pass muster at Gardentown: Not a speck of artificial color on them. A nursery employee said they hadn't had a single painted or glitter-bombed pot all season.

Next stop: Ken's Gardens in Intercourse, Pennsylvania. Outdoors, young employees were unstringing lights, packing them away for their long summer nap. Inside was a bench of poinsettias in various sizes, also reduced 75%, some painted and/or glitter-adorned. Owner Kerry Lapp said, "They're not the hot item they were 10 years ago, but some people still want them."

For what it's worth, I still like them. They were audacious and downright divisive when Gloeckner launched their Fantasy Colors around 2002; apparently they still are in Texas. They make great gag gifts for friends who gag at anything not steeped in tradition. Kerry and I agreed that they'll probably have a retro resurgence sometime around

2035.

Elsewhere in the Ball Publishing world you'll find very different takes on painted poinsettias. Editor-in-Chief Chris Beytes and Editrix Jen Zurko have posted videos of two different growers' trials, each featuring over 200 varieties. I had no idea there were so many. The number still looks like a typo. One Midwestern grower produces just 40% reds; about a third are white, and half of those get a paint job and a $3 markup.

In 2006, on a rare trip off this continent, I chatted up the proprietor of a British garden centre over a table of garish 12-cm painted heathers, the UK's analogous controversial crime against nature. We can't grow a decent Calluna vulgaris here, but in Britain's conditions it's an easily produced throwaway plant, an impulse item.

The gent admitted ruefully, "Yes, they're tacky. But they do sell." I told him we do something similar with poinsettias. Wide-eyed, he gasped, "Oh, that's just WRONG!"

Yeah, well. Eye of the beholder, eh?

You want "Just WRONG?" Plant-painting pales before a truly regrettable new-ish tradition: Inflatables. It says here, every blown-up Frosty is an abominable snowman. One brisk afternoon, I hit the mother lode. Four adjacent houses had dozens of snowmen, wise men, Santas, camels, elves, reindeer, yada yada littering their lawns. High winds were coming, so all were deflated, sprawled on their backs or faces like gaudy, flabby corpses. It was simultaneously ghastly and hilarious, as if Machine Gun Kelly (the gangster, not the rapper) had come roaring through town to commit the St. Nick's Day massacre.

In my windshield and your rearview now: MANTS, which This Space will recap next month. Meanwhile, a belated Happy New Year and a downright moldy Merry Christmas to all. **GP**

John Friel is a freelance writer with more than 40 years of experience in horticulture.