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School’s greenhouse beginning to look like Christmas
BY KAY SHIPMAN
FarmWeek

 A sea of scarlet, creamy white and pink made Newark High School’s greenhouse a feast for the senses.

With thoughts turning toward the Christmas holiday, agriculture students and Newark FFA members are busy caring for 1,100 poinsettias that will decorate homes, businesses and churches around Kendall County.

High school agriculture teacher Joe Steffen, sporting a full Santa beard for the season, explained that raising poinsettias helps students to learn the steps needed to get poinsettias to turn color at the desired time, about the plants’ nutrient requirements and how to identify diseases and insects.

“It’s a great hands-on activity for learning about growing plants and their needs,” the teacher told **FarmWeek**.

“I think they’re great plants. We always have some at our home,” added FFA Chapter President Jack Gomoll, who plans to study agricultural engineering.

Gomoll, a senior, and his fellow students stay busy hand-watering, feeding and removing dead leaves from the colorful plants.

By the time the poinsettias arrive at the school, they’ve already gone through the necessary light and dark periods of short days and long nights. In the school greenhouse, students learn that adjusting the temperature a couple of degrees lower will brighten the colors, Steffen explained.

Poinsettias’ color comes from modified leaves, known as bracts, that surround the plants’ tiny yellow flowers. In addition to traditional red and white plants, Newark students are also caring for pink, marbled and “jingle bell” poinsettias that are red with flecks of white.

After 10 years of poinsettia production, Steffen had to scramble this year to find a greenhouse supplier after the school’s longtime source switched to industrial hemp, he said. Fortunately, G & E Greenhouses Inc., Maple Park, was able to fill Newark’s poinsettia needs.

Student learning doesn’t stop with production, but includes learning about marketing and presentation. Before delivery, each pot is wrapped in decorative foil and enclosed in a plastic bag to protect the cold-sensitive plant from winter weather.

Students will start taking poinsettia orders around Thanksgiving with plants selling for $10 each. Proceeds support the FFA chapter and the next greenhouse project of raising bedding plants that will be sold in the spring. For information about poinsettia purchases, email Steffen at jsteffen@nchs18.org.

Before the Newark students and FFA launch their poinsettia Christmas sales, they are preparing for a pre-Thanksgiving Newark FFA toy show Nov. 24 from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the school. That followed closely on their Halloween event of a haunted corn maze with students portraying spooky roles.

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