



The Legend of The Poinsettia

(the legend says that it was a boy, but I love this story of Juanita)

Juanita was a little girl who lived in the small village of San Pancho, Mexico hundreds of years ago. Juanita's family were farmers and they were very poor. As Christmas approached, Juanita's mama and papa became sick and Juanita had to help care for her little brother and sister. There was much work to be done and young Juanita did her best to cook and clean and help with the burro in the fields. All the people of the village were decorating the church and making special gifts to give to the Christ Child on Christmas Eve.

Everyone would take part in the Christmas Eve procession, singing and carrying candles. Then Padre Gonzalez would place the figure of the Baby Jesus in the manger and the villagers would put their special gifts around the manger. Juanita had tried to weave a colorful blanket for the Christ Child, but she was too little and the yarns became tangled. She tried to sew little leather boots for her gift, but the leather was too tough and she was not strong enough to push the needle through. She tried to think of something very special that her family could give to the Baby Jesus, but with mama and papa sick and her younger brother and sister too small to help, she could think of nothing. At last it was Christmas Eve. The entire village was ready to form the procession; the candles were lit, the singing began as the villagers walked through San Pancho carrying their gifts to place at the manger.

Juanita hid in the darkness, watching with tears in her eyes as the procession went to the church.

Suddenly an old man stepped from the shadows nearby. "Little girl, are you Juanita?" He said. "Si," answered Juanita, wondering who he could be. "I have a message for you. Your mama and papa are going to get well soon. So do not worry. Go to the church and celebrate Christmas with the other villagers. Your brother and sister are waiting for you." "I can't," Juanita told him. "I don't have a gift for the Baby Jesus. I tried and tried to make something but I couldn't finish it."

"Ah, Juanita, don't you know that any gift is beautiful because it is given. Whatever you give, the Baby Jesus will love, because it comes from you." "But what can I give?" And Juanita began looking around. She saw a big patch of green weeds nearby. Juanita rushed over and picked a huge armful. Then turned to the old man. But he was gone. Juanita walked into the church. All of the candles were blazing, the children were singing as she walked down the aisle with her bundle of green weeds. "What is Juanita carrying?" the villagers whispered.

"She's bringing weeds into the church!" Juanita placed the green weeds all around the manger. Then she bowed her head and prayed. A hush fell over the church. Voices whispered, "Look!, Look at the weeds!" Juanita opened her eyes. Each weed was topped with a flaming red star. And when everyone went outside after the Mass, all the bunches of tall green weeds throughout the town were shining with red stars. Juanita's simple gift had become beautiful.

And every Christmas to this day, the red stars shine on top of the green branches in Mexico. The people call the plant la Flor de Nochebuena. The flower of the Holy Night - the Poinsettia.

by Tomie dePaola

