

Holiday Plants – Christmas Cactus

Published 12/3/19 – image is a free download of an 1897 print of a Christmas cactus from the book “Favourite flowers of garden and greenhouse” by Edward Step

Commonly known as Christmas cactus, but perhaps more correctly called holiday cactus, these plants are famous for their winter flowering. I choose the nomenclature “holiday” over Christmas because there are several varieties available that flower not only during Christmas but Thanksgiving and Easter as well. The season you could expect a particular plant to flower can be found in the shape of what look like leaves but are actually flat stem segments. The earliest (Thanksgiving) will have distinct points on the edges of its segments. The later the flowering the less pointy the segments become with Easter cactus being very smooth or rounded.

This houseplant has a wonderful genus name of *Schlumbergera* which I think just sounds kind of neat. They naturally grow in the coastal mountainous areas of southeast Brazil, which being in the southern hemisphere with their opposite seasons, probably helps them flower for us in the winter. In their natural state these plants do not need rich soil or in some cases soil at all, as they are commonly found growing in rock crevices and as epiphytes (growing on trees).



A vibrant red is probably the most common flower color, but purples, oranges, pinks, whites, and even yellows are available. Some enthusiasts graft the colors so each branch of a single plant has a different flower color. No matter the color, all flowers are very similarly shaped with long, tubular necks and in a chamber at the base of these tubes is where nectar is formed. Hummingbirds are the main pollinators for most species in their natural environment.

Once in a home, holiday cactus are relatively easy to care for. I'm regularly asked to re-pot holiday cactus that are 50 or more years old. They like to be root bound, they are more drought tolerant than most houseplants, and don't need a lot of light to thrive. In fact, complete darkness for 12 hours each day at around 60 degrees has been shown to induce flower bud formation. So as you can see, as our day light periods shorten in the fall, this is beneficial for future flowering of our holiday cactus.

Propagation of holiday cactus, whether done by professional growers or amateur plant owners, is done by twisting off 1-3 segments of stem, allow the broken end to callus by laying them out overnight, and then submerging the bottom half of the lowest segment into a new pot. That's about as easy as it can be. Keeping the temperatures around 70 and more day light than darkness helps in root development. Some older plants that have been slightly stressed out, usually by not enough water or sometimes too much sun light, start developing tiny roots at the segment joints. Segments with the roots already coming out usually have a better chance of continuing to develop a good root system.

If grafting different colored stems onto the same plant is too daunting, simply taking stem segments from plants with different colored flowers is a simple way to create a unique plant that visitors will certainly comment on. Don't over water them and your chance for having that plant as your roommate for years to come is very good.

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