



“From the Winter Potting Shed”

Riverview Garden Club – Helpful Hints
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Holiday cactus plants are very popular gifts. They tend to bloom around Thanksgiving and Christmas. When giving or receiving this plant, it’s good to know how to care for a Christmas cactus. Here are a few tips that will keep your blooming Christmas cactus in perfect health and producing flowers annually.

Christmas Cactus Care & Maintenance

The popular, winter-flowering Christmas cactus makes a great addition to nearly any houseplant collection. Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter cactus varieties all bloom with beautiful tropical flowers and have softly pointed leaves, but there are differences among them. Christmas cactus blooms are magenta to pink in color and the notched leaves are rounded with arching stems. The Christmas variety is native to South America and has very little tolerance for cold. They are most commonly grown as houseplants, but Christmas cacti can be placed outdoors in the summer months.

Types of Holiday Cactus

It’s good to understand whether you have a true Christmas cactus. The Easter and Thanksgiving cactus varieties look deceptively similar, so check out our comprehensive article here to identify which kind of holiday cactus you have.



Thanksgiving cactus

Schlumbergera truncata



Christmas cactus

Schlumbergera bridgesii



Easter cactus

Rhipsalidopsis gaertneri

Schlumbergera x buckleyi is the true Christmas cactus, but *Schlumbergera truncata* is also sold as a Christmas cactus. A true Christmas cactus has purple anthers and deeply pink or magenta blooms, with smoother stems. *Schlumbergera truncata* has more notched stems and blooms earlier, closer to Thanksgiving. There is also the Easter cactus (*Rhipsalidopsis gaertneri*, formerly *Schlumbergera gaertneri*), which blooms later.

How to Care for Christmas Cactus

Moisture is important to the health of a Christmas cactus. The plant requires frequent and thorough watering during its active growth in spring and summer, with the soil staying slightly moist. Allow the plant's moisture levels to drop and dry out some between watering intervals, but don't let it dry completely. Never let the Christmas cactus sit in water, as this will lead to stem and root rot. Applying a mild houseplant fertilizer solution every other week is also acceptable.

Light

Christmas cactus houseplant care requires the plant to be placed near a bright window, but one where the extreme rays of afternoon sun won't burn it. In their native habitat these plants grow in tree branches and rock crevasses as understory plants, so in their natural environment they receive mostly filtered sunlight. Indoors, a bright window with a sheer curtain can provide optimal light. Morning sun is ideal.

Water

Your Christmas cactus' need for water is different from the needs of desert cactus. Unlike desert varieties, these cacti are native to areas with tropical rainfall during part of the year. When rainfall isn't present, they get moisture from dew and grow from organic matter deposits or where moss grows. Sites like these aren't naturally moist all the time, nor are they extremely dry.

During the growing seasons of spring and summer, water the Christmas cactus enough to keep the soil moist but not soggy. Never allow the plant to sit in water. When the plant is dormant in the cooler seasons, keep it a bit drier. When it's in dormancy and not actively growing, the plant doesn't need as much moisture.

Temperature & Humidity

When considering how to care for Christmas cactus, keep in mind it prefers temperatures between 60 and 70 degrees F, with average to high humidity levels. Placing a tray of pebbles filled with water beneath the Christmas cactus container is a good way to add more humidity [4] to the home. Avoid exposing the plant to cold drafts, unvented heaters, or rough handling. Night temperatures above 70 F may inhibit its bud development.

Soil

The Christmas cactus does not grow in special cactus soil. Instead, it needs well-draining soil which retains a bit of moisture. A mixture of 1 part potting soil to 2 parts peat moss and 1 part perlite is ideal. Alternately, potting soil mixed with orchid mixture or pine bark will provide a good medium. Re-pot the plant when it's really needed, but the cactus actually flowers best when it is pot bound.

Fertilizer

From June to August, feed your Christmas cactus plant monthly with a diluted houseplant fertilizer. In fall, as the flower buds begin to form, switch to a low nitrogen food that is higher in phosphorus and potassium. This will fuel the flower development and prompt your Christmas cactus to bloom [5] by holiday time. The root system of the Christmas cactus is fine and shallow, and can be damaged by overfertilization. Applying a mild houseplant fertilizer to a Christmas cactus every other week is acceptable.

Problems, Pests and Bud Drop

Allowing the plant to stand in water can promote fungal diseases that could kill the roots. Outdoor Christmas cactus pests include mealy bugs, aphids and scale, but these can be gently wiped away with a soft cloth or swab dipped in alcohol.

If your beautiful Christmas cactus doesn't produce many blossoms or it begins to drop its buds, there could be a few reasons. High temperatures in excess of 90 degrees F in the fall can cause the newly forming Christmas cactus buds to drop. Or, if there has been a sudden drop in temperature, the Christmas cactus may react by dropping buds or withholding them. Try providing the plant with 13 straight hours of nighttime darkness.

How to Prune a Christmas Cactus

For the most part, Christmas cacti do not need pruning. Remove any damaged or diseased sections as they occur. Pruning a Christmas cactus back after it blooms may promote more blooms the following season. Cut sections with a sharp, sterile implement at the section joint. This will promote more branching at the cut.

Christmas Cactus Propagation and How to Plant

Christmas cacti are propagated through stem cuttings. For rooting in water, separate the length of a healthy stem you want to root and place in water.

To root cuttings for new plants, cut back shoots from the tips at the second joint of each tip and allow the cut end to callus for a few days. Root hormone may speed up the process.

Insert the callused end to about a quarter of its length deep into slightly sandy soil.

Moisten it evenly, cover the potted cutting in a plastic bag.

Place the pot in a well-lit area, avoiding direct sunlight.

The cutting should show signs of growth within a few weeks, at which time the plant can be transferred to another container with a looser potting soil mix of compost, loam and sand. The best Christmas cactus soil has a pH balance of 5.5 to 6.2.

Repotting a Christmas Cactus

Using the same potting mixture as the original plant, pre-moisten it so roots aren't disturbed after potting. Christmas cacti prefer to be pot bound but they do need fresh soil every year or 2. When it is time to repot a Christmas cactus, only give it a bit more room than the canopy. To promote further branching, prune the plant back a bit prior to repotting.

How to Make a Christmas Cactus Bloom

To make a Christmas cactus flower, it needs exposure to cooler temperatures of 45 degrees F. The key is to give it bright daytime light, 13 hours of nighttime darkness, and cooler temperature exposure. September is the time to move the plant to a cooler location of the home where it will produce blooms more readily. This move will be a signal to the plant that it's time to bloom.

Happy Holiday Gardening!

Source:

Nikki Tilley and Caroline Bloomfield, "Advice for Christmas Cactus Care," [Gardening Know How Newsletter](#), November 1, 2023.