



Rockin E Gardening Handouts

Tips and Suggestions for 'Year-Round' Gardening

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Christmas Cactus

Christmas Cactus can add a little more interest and a little more variety to your houseplant collection. They are different than most other houseplants, and they can be very easy to take care of. Christmas Cactus produce an abundance of flowers and can flower for six weeks, and sometimes even longer. Add an Easter Cactus, or a Thanksgiving Cactus to your collection, and you can almost have one of these beauties blooming throughout the year.

Christmas cactus is a member of the cactus family, but it doesn't have spines. Unlike its thorny relatives, Christmas Cactus prefer humid, moist conditions with only a moderate amount of sunlight. Christmas Cactus grow naturally in the tropical rain forests; not in the hot, dry deserts. Christmas cactus seem to thrive on neglect. Unlike most other houseplants, forgetting to water them for a week or two will not hurt them.

The Christmas Cactus belongs to the plant genus **Schlumbergera**. They were previously classified in the plant genus **Zygocactus**. Even though the classification has been changed, most people still refer to the Christmas Cactus as a Zygocactus. The true Christmas Cactus are only available in red and pink. Through years of plant breeding, Thanksgiving Cactus are now available in several different shades of red, white, pink, purple, yellow, and salmon.



Many people purchase a Christmas Cactus during the holiday time, while it is full of blooms and buds. Once they get it home, they lose all the buds and blossoms.



Moving the plant from a greenhouse environment to a home environment, where the humidity goes from 60 percent to one where the humidity is 10 percent, will cause the flower buds to drop. Eventually, the plants acclimate to lower home humidity and will bloom again beautifully. Be patient, the plant will produce new, beautiful flowers, but unfortunately not this season.

Dropping buds can also be a result of over-watering, temperature changes, or change of light. Your plant was given special treatment by the grower to make it bloom at Christmas, and it was provided with perfect growing conditions during this time. Somewhere it encountered less than ideal conditions. The resulting bud drop is the plant's way of dealing with the new conditions.

Light Suggestions

Christmas Cactus prefer indirect, moderate light, which means they should be within three feet of a south, west, or east window. While the Christmas cactus can adapt to low light situations, more abundant blooms are produced on plants that have more light intensity. However, they do not like being placed in direct sunlight, where they may sunburn easily. Turning the plants once in a while, to give each side an equal share of the brightest light, will also help. Christmas Cactus will not bloom as well in a northern window, without extra, artificial lighting.



If you put your Christmas Cactus outside during the summer, be sure to grow it in partial shade; not full sun. Long periods of strong, direct sunlight will sunburn them.

Temperature Suggestions

We typically think of cacti as being heat tolerant, but Christmas cacti will keep their blossoms longer in cooler temperatures. Keep the plant away from drafts from heat vents, fireplaces or other sources of hot air. Drafts



and temperature extremes can cause the flower buds to drop from the plant before they have a chance to open. It can also cause the flowers to fade prematurely.

Christmas cactus are sensitive to very cold temperatures. Keep your Christmas Cactus warm most of the year. Try to keep your plants between 65 to 90 degrees from November through September. Cool your plants down during the fall to help stimulate flower formation. Keep your plants between 50 to 60 degrees from September until they start to bloom in November. Do not ever let them get lower than 45 degrees!

Fertilizer Suggestions

Christmas cactus do not necessarily need fertilizer while they are blooming. Fertilize Christmas Cactus every three or four weeks during the spring and summer with either **Bonide All Purpose Plant Food** or **Miracle Gro All Purpose Plant Food**.

Don't fertilize them at all during the fall when you are trying to get them to start blooming again. Wait until after they start to bloom before you fertilize them.



Watering Suggestions

Unlike the cactus name suggests, Christmas Cactus prefer moist soil, not dry soil. Keep the soil moist from the time the flower buds appear in November through the end of summer. If the soil gets too dry, the flowers buds may drop, and the plant may wilt. Feel the soil with your fingers, if it feels dry, it's time to water.

Too much water will cause spots from 'white rot' to appear on the leaves, and the leaves will most likely fall off. The soil should be evenly moist for best growth. The rule of thumb is, 'less water is better than too much water'.

Let the soil dry out a little more from September until the flower buds begin to show in November; then start keeping the soil moist again. However, if you keep the soil too dry, the stems will shrivel. If you keep the soil too wet, the roots will rot and the flower buds may not form. Consistent soil moisture is the key to growing Christmas Cactus successfully.



Flowering suggestions

Christmas cactus do not like sudden drafts and will drop their buds or flowers if exposed to these conditions. Keep them away from frequently opened doors.

To make Christmas Cactus bloom for Christmas they must have cool temperatures, dry soil, and short days (long nights) for an extended period of time.

Christmas Cactus must have at least thirteen hours of continuous darkness each night for at least eight to ten weeks before they will start to bloom. You may have to put your cactus in a closet during the night to provide this amount of continuous darkness. If your plants receive artificial light during the night, they will probably not bloom on time. Start this "closet treatment" early in September. Keep up the "closet treatment" until buds begin to show in November.

Do not just leave your Christmas cactus in the closet all day. Be sure to put your Christmas Cactus in a bright sunny window during the day.

Cut back the amount of water you give your plants during this period and keep the plants cool, between 50 to 60 degrees F.

After the flower buds begin to form, move your plants back into normal light. Start fertilizing them more often, and watering them regularly, to help the flower buds open properly.



Common Problems

The most common problem of the Christmas Cactus is the flowers dropping off prematurely. This problem can be caused by:

1. Sudden changes in temperature, either too hot or too cold. Do not put your plant in front of a furnace vent or next to a doorway. Be careful when you transport your plants

during the winter. Protect them from the cold weather.

2. Dramatic changes in light, either in the day length or the light intensity. Don't forget to bring the plants out of the closet during the day if you are trying to limit their light using the 'Closet Treatment'. Don't move your Christmas Cactus from one location to another once the buds begin to form.

3. Occasionally a plant may produce too many blossoms for the roots to support. If the soil becomes too dry, or too wet, the roots may not be able to continue to support all the blossoms it produced. It is common for a few blossoms just to fall off for no reason at all.

4. Ethylene gas causes flowers to drop prematurely. Do not keep your plants in their protective sleeves longer than necessary. Do not put Christmas Cactus next to vegetables or fruit, especially the older, extra ripe fruit. Exhaust fumes from cars and trucks also contain high amounts of ethylene gas. It is not good to keep your Christmas cactus in the garage.

Propagation suggestions

Propagate a Christmas Cactus by cutting off sections of the stem. Each section must consist of two or three joined segments. Allow each section to dry for a few hours before pushing them into a 3-inch pot that contains the same potting soil as the parent plant.

Plant halfway down the first segment. Care for the cuttings just like mature plants. In about four to six weeks, the cuttings should have rooted and will begin to show some new growth. They grow quickly, and should produce roots in about two or three weeks. You can fertilize after the cutting has grown one new segment.



The three common flowering cacti are called Holiday Cactus.

Thanksgiving Cactus *Schlumbergera truncatus*. These cacti are also called Crab

or Yoke Cactus because of their pointed lobes. The branches are usually upright and erect. They are available in many different colors and start blooming in late fall through Christmas. This is the common 'Christmas Cactus'. The petals are one sided and have reflexing petals.

Christmas Cactus *Schlumbergera bridgessii*. It is the true Christmas Cactus. It has rounded lobed leaves. The branches are usually weeping. It is only available in one color - red. It starts blooming about a month after Thanksgiving cactus, and rarely blooms before Thanksgiving. The flower petals are evenly distributed around the flower tube.

Easter Cactus *Rhipsalidopsis gaertnerii*. These cacti have wider rounded leaves, often tinged with red. They have bristles on the sides of segments and at the tip of the terminal segments. They generally start blooming in February or March.



Easter Cactus

Rhipsalidopsis gaertnerii

Even though Christmas Cactus and Easter Cactus may look similar they belong to completely different genera. Easter Cactus belongs to the plant genus *Rhipsalidopsis* while Christmas Cactus belongs to the genus *Schlumbergera*.



Easter Cactus grow more upright than Christmas Cactus, but they still have the typical drooping stems. Easter Cactus flowers are typically a little longer than Christmas Cactus and can grow up to three inches long. Easter Cactus flowers will be upright or horizontal, not drooping like the Christmas Cactus. Easter Cactus also have a more rounded stem than the Christmas Cactus.

The main difference between Christmas Cactus and Easter Cactus is their blooming time. Easter Cactus bloom in the spring (April and May) while Christmas Cactus bloom in the winter (November to January). Easter cactus may bloom again in September if the growing conditions are right.



Take care of your Easter Cactus the same way you care for your Christmas Cactus during the summer. Water and fertilize them regularly. Keep them warm and give them indirect light during the spring and summer. Easter Cactus do not generally need any special treatment to help them bloom in April. Mother nature usually provides the right amount of darkness.

If you want your Easter Cactus to bloom in September start limiting its light in August. When you start limiting the light, make sure you also reduce the amount of water you give your plants, reduce the amount of fertilizer you apply, and be sure to keep your plants cool.



Easter Cactus



Thanksgiving Cactus



Thanksgiving Cactus

The true Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgessii*) is rarely cultivated. It's leaves are considered too thin with long weeping branches. It has slender and smooth segments.



What most people grow is Thanksgiving Cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*). It is more compact, more dense, and has larger upright and erect stems. They often bloom about a full month before the true Christmas cactus, given the same treatment. They are easier to make to bloom, but the flowers might not always last until Christmas.

It is known as "Thanksgiving Cactus" because it blooms in late November. Thanksgiving Cactus are also called Crab Cactus, or Yoke Cactus, because of their pointed segment lobes. They are available in many different colors.



Most people try to encourage their plants to be blooming during the holiday season. The key to getting Christmas Cactus to flower during the holiday season is proper light exposure, correct temperatures, and limited watering - for the correct amount of time.



Christmas Cactus



How to get your Christmas Cactus to Bloom this Holiday and Next Year.



Basic Care

Light: Place in a bright but indirectly lit south, east, or west window.

Water: Keep moist during growth and flowering. At other times, allow to dry out between waterings.

Humidity: Average indoor humidity levels. Watch level in winter when furnace is on.

Fertilization: Fertilize only when plant is actively growing (April to September)

Temperature:

To set flower buds - 40° to 45 F at night, 60° to 65° F during the day.

Other times of the year - 55° to 60° F at night, 70° F during the day.

Propagation: Take cuttings from recently matured stems or shoots when the plant is in not in flower.

Repotting: Infrequent repotting is best. Plants like to be root-bound.

Problems:

1. Water - Too dry of soil, or keeping the soil too wet.
2. Fertilizer - Salt or Mineral buildup in the soil may damage roots.
3. Temperature - Plants cannot tolerate frost, especially while in transit.

January	Flowering Period
February	Resting Period
March	Keep Cool (55° F) Water infrequently
April	Treat Normally. Water thoroughly when soil begins to dry out, do not let soil dry out too much. Fertilize monthly.
May	
June	Outdoors: Place in a shady spot.
July	Indoors: Keep out of direct sunlight.
August	
September	Pre-flowering Period
October	Keep dryish and cool until flower buds form. After buds form, increase water and temperature.
November	
December	Flowering Period
	Water normally. Maintain a minimum temperature of 55° F. It is sensitive to being moved during this time period. (They are very Sensitive to light and temperature changes)

