

## Christmas Cactus

By Susan Camp

I inherited my first Christmas cactus from a neighbor in Germany who was moving back to the U.S. My second cactus was a gift from a friend. At the time, we had a little houseplant-eating critter named Bilbo Baggins. Bilbo was a great cat in most ways, but he couldn't be trusted around greenery. One day I came home to a nub of a Christmas cactus. Six cats later, I still envy friends who display the gloriously blooming succulents during the holidays. When my friend Paulette recently posted several photos of her beautiful cacti on Facebook, I remembered the excitement of discovering the first blooms in time for the Christmas season.

Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*) and its relatives, Thanksgiving cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*) and Easter cactus (*Rhipsalidopsis gaertneri*), are native to the mountainous coastal rain forests of southeastern Brazil. Holiday cacti lack true leaves; the stem segments are known botanically as phylloclades. Phylloclades differ between the types of holiday cacti. Christmas cactus stem segments are rounded, while the segments on Thanksgiving cactus are serrated. The Easter cactus has pointed teeth and fibrous hairs in the segment joints and blooms in the spring. It is important to identify the type of cactus you have, so you won't be disappointed when it doesn't bloom during the expected season.

The tubular flowers of Christmas cactus occur in an array of luscious shades, including, white, pink, coral, peach, red, and lavender. Some bicolor cultivars are available.

Light and temperature are the two most significant factors affecting bloom. During the summer, Christmas cactus will grow best in light shade. Direct summer sunlight will cause stem segments to turn yellow. From April to September, the plants require temperatures between 70 to 80 °F. Pinch back the stems in early June to encourage branching.

Beginning about mid-September, subject your cactus to 14 hours or more of continuous darkness each day for at least six weeks. An unused bedroom or bathroom is an ideal location for the necessary "long nights." Buds will set within three to four weeks. Interruption of darkness for as little as two hours will interfere with budding. During this period, the ideal temperature is between 60 to 68 °F. At the end of September, remove stem segments less than 1/2 inch long to promote flowering on mature segments.

Christmas and other holiday cacti thrive when pot bound. Repot in fresh medium every three years. A good mix is 60 to 80% pH-balanced potting soil to 40 to 20% perlite. Water your cactus when the soil is dry to the touch. Over watering is a frequent cause of Christmas cactus demise. Fertilize monthly from late winter or early spring through the summer growing season with 20-20-20 liquid fertilizer. Holiday cacti need extra magnesium in the form of Epsom salts (magnesium sulfate) 1 teaspoon per gallon of water. Stagger monthly applications of Epsom salts and regular fertilizer.

Christmas cactus is easy to propagate. Pinch off a stem segment with three to five phylloclades and allow to dry for several hours or overnight. Push the pinched end 1 inch deep into fresh potting medium, water and cover with a plastic bag held in place with a rubber band. Place in bright, indirect light for several weeks until roots form, then remove the bag and fertilize with a dilute solution. The young Christmas cactus will grow rapidly.

Christmas cactus may drop flower buds if exposed to a sudden change of light or temperature or lack of sufficient water. Root rot can occur with excessive watering. Soft brown scale, mealybugs, aphids, red spider mites, and gnats can infest Christmas cactus. Some cats find the non-toxic stem segments tasty.

Information on growing holiday cacti is available in the Clemson Cooperative Extension publication HGIC 1554 "Thanksgiving & Christmas Cacti." Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-101 "Care of Specialty Potted Plants" offers general information. The University of Illinois Extension Homeowners Column article "Christmas Cactus Care" discusses common problems.

December 15, 2016