



## GROWING TIPS FOR CHRISTMAS CACTUS

Christmas cacti are very popular holiday gift plants. Since Grandma's day, the Christmas cactus has been a favorite houseplant. It's not unusual for a single plant to be passed down from generation to generation because they're long-lived, rather easy plants to grow. The flowers range in color from light yellow, salmon, pink, fuchsia and white or combinations of those colors



Hybridization over the past century has resulted in the introduction of many new varieties of Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter cactus. Although these plants are called cacti, they are truly different in all aspects from the common desert cactus with which we are all familiar. These plants, called epiphytes are found in the same environments as orchids. They are most often found in the forks of tree limbs where they grow in decayed leaves and other natural debris that accumulates there. Since they are tropical cacti, their cultural requirements are totally different from true cacti. So here are a few ideas on how to care for them and the steps to follow to get them into bloom for the upcoming holiday season.

### LOCATION AND TEMPERATURE

When indoors Christmas cactus prefer a well lit area. The buds will either not open or drop from the plant if the light conditions are not adequate. Christmas cactus require about 50 to 60 percent humidity. So it's a good practice to place a glass, vase or tray of water near the plant. As the water evaporates it will provide the humidity the cactus needs. A humidity tray is another method of providing the humidity the Christmas cactus requires. This is done by filling a waterproof saucer with gravel, then adding water halfway up the gravel. Place the pot on the gravel surface. The Christmas cactus should never be placed near a door that opens and closes to the outside. Likewise, keep it away from heating ducts or near the fireplace or drafty areas.

### WATERING AND FERTILIZING

Since the Christmas cactus is a tropical plant it will require watering on much the same basis as any other type of tropical plant. A good procedure to follow is to water the plants thoroughly and then allow about the top inch of soil to dry before watering again. However, during the fall and winter months, the plants should be watered less frequently in order to get them to bloom. In late October

or early November, make an application of a 0-10-10 type liquid fertilizer. A second application of this fertilizer can be made in February. During the growing season from April through September, fertilize the plants with an all purpose liquid houseplant type fertilizer. The fertilizer you use should have a nitrogen . ratio of no higher than 10 percent. Of the three numbers on a fertilizer container, the first number is nitrogen. While Christmas cactus are in full bloom fertilizer is not required.

One of the most frustrating things that can happen to Christmas cactus is after the flower buds have developed they drop off the plant. Bud drop can be caused by anyone of several different conditions. Usually it's because of over-watering, lack of humidity or insufficient light

After the holiday season, the Christmas cactus should be given about a 30 day rest. Again place it in a cool room and provide limited water. Don't worry if it loses a few leaves or joints and appears weak during this rest period. This is not the time to pinch, prune or shape a Christmas cactus. The best time to prune is when the new growth begins in March or early April. Pruning will encourage the plant to branch out. Remove a few sections of each stem by pinching them off with your fingers or cutting with a sharp knife. These sections can be rooted in moist vermiculite to propagate new plants.

Likewise, the best time for repotting a cactus is in February, March or April. However, keep in mind the plant will flower best if it's kept in a container where it's pot-bound.

Plants can be moved outdoors in summer, but keep them in a shady or semi-shady location. Leaves may start to turn a bit red if exposed to excessive light. Too much direct sunlight can actually burn the leaves or may cause them to become limp. When it's time to bring the plants back inside in the fall, slowly adjust the plants to life indoors by gradually increasing the number of hours they spend indoors each day.

## **GETTING CHRISTMAS CACTUS TO REBLOOM**

There appears to be much confusion about these unique tropical cacti regarding care, maintenance and, especially, on how to get them to re-bloom. In September and October, Christmas cactus plants should be kept in a cool room where temperatures will remain around 50 degrees, give or take a few degrees. Be sure not to expose them to freezing temperatures. It's also very important they be kept in a room where no artificial light will be turned on at night. Christmas cactus need at least 12 to 14 hours of total darkness after mid September in order to bloom for the holidays. Plants should be sparingly watered during this period of

time. Plants should be blooming for the holidays if cool treatments are started by early November. Once the plants develop buds the short day and temperature treatment can be discontinued.

One question often asked is “what is the difference between Christmas Cactus , Thanksgiving cactus, and Easter cactus?” They all have slightly different growth habits. Christmas cacti have scalloped stem segments and bloom at the stem tips. Thanksgiving cacti have 2-4 pointy teeth along the edges of the sections and will bloom earlier than Christmas cactus if left to natural day-length. Easter cacti have rounded teeth along the segments and bloom primarily in the spring but may also periodically re-bloom at other times

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