

Christmas Cactus

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Christmas cacti are not only popular holiday gift plants, but they are also the subject of frequent debate among gardeners. There appears to be much confusion about these unique tropical cacti regarding care, maintenance and, especially, on how to get them to re-bloom. Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*) is one of those plants (like *Amaryllis*) that blooms during the month of December--hence the name Christmas cactus. Here are a few tips to make sure your Christmas cactus does indeed produce beautiful blooms during the holiday season.

We typically think of cacti as being heat tolerant, but Christmas cacti will keep their blossoms longer in cooler temperatures. During the growing season keep temperatures between 70 and 80 degrees. Christmas cactus is native to Brazil so it prefers warm temperatures during the vegetative growing season. Temperatures, particularly at night should be cooler to initiate flower development. Keep the plant in a well-lit location 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.

Use well-drained, sterile potting soil that contains sand. Well-drained soil is very important to Christmas cactus survival; however, most potting soil is very light in weight. Christmas cactus flowers at the end of the branches and can become quite top heavy (meaning the vegetative part weighs more than the root system) causing the plant to tip over if the potting medium is also very light. Adding sand to the mix stabilizes the pot.

Pruning your Christmas cactus after blooming 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.

Don't overwater as with many house plants, overwatering will cause the roots to rot. Do let the Christmas cactus dry out between watering's, but not so much that it's dusty and parched!

Shorten the daylight period to 9 or 10 hours in other words, Christmas cactus needs 14 to 15 hours of uninterrupted darkness--key word: uninterrupted--in order to trigger flower development. Ideally, you should start doing this in mid-September if you want your Christmas cactus to bloom during the holidays; however, it can be later in the season if you want to add a bit of color to your life in January or February.

Maintain night temperatures between 55 and 60 degrees temperatures below 55 degrees F. may cause less than optimal flower performance and keeping temperatures above 70 degrees F. tends to inhibit bud development all together. Using a back porch or some other area where lights are usually turned off at night and it is a little cooler works well.

The plant does not particularly need to be fertilized while in bloom, but most gardeners enjoy the challenge of keeping the plant after the holidays for re-bloom the next year. While plants are actively growing, use a blooming houseplant-type fertilizer and follow the label directions for how much and how often to feed.

Christmas cacti are easy to propagate by cuttings, which are taken in May or June. Pinch off sections of stems with 3 to 5 segments on each. Allow the cut ends of the sections to callus by placing them outdoors in the shade for a day or two. Choose a well-drained potting. Place the cuttings at approximately one inch deep. Water the soil well, and cover the plants and rooting container with a clear plastic bag secured with a rubber band around the container. The plastic bag will act as a miniature greenhouse to keep the relative humidity at 100% to enhance rooting. Place the container in bright, indirect light until roots have formed in three to eight weeks. At this time the plastic bag can be removed, and a dilute fertilizer solution can be used at watering.

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