



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

The Christmas Cactus – an Eye-Catching Delight (November 18, 2023)

by Rosie Bonar, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

The striking flowers of the plant, commonly called the Christmas cactus, may catch your attention in stores and nurseries around this time of year. Their bell-shaped blooms in shades of red, pink, orange, or white can add a cheerful note to your indoor garden during the holidays.

My neighbor once gave me a plant she called a Christmas Cactus as a gift at Christmas time. My neighbor was an avid gardener and had a Christmas Cactus of her own that she had had for several years. I had never heard of it, and fair warning -- I did not have much luck with it. Here are some hints and tips I've since learned that will hopefully allow me to have better luck on my next try.

IDENTIFICATION:

The Christmas Cactus has several common names. Among the common names are Crab Cactus, Holiday Cactus, Christmas Cactus, and Thanksgiving Cactus. The scientific name for the plant is *Schlumbergera*. There are two main cultivars: the *Truncata* group and the *Buckleyi* group. The *Truncata* cultivar is frequently dubbed a Thanksgiving cactus, and the *Buckleyi* group a Christmas cactus. Thanksgiving cactus clades (leaves) have pointy ends, while the Christmas cactus tends to have scalloped clades shaped like arrowheads.

Schlumbergera is in the cactus family; however, it does not resemble what we consider a typical cactus. Its segmented flat "leaves" are actually fleshy stems called phylloclade or cladode (a.k.a. "clades"), which are actually modified branches.



It is native to Brazil, where it grows in a humid, shady rainforest instead of the typical dry desert habitat of the southwestern United States, where we expect to find a cactus. In its native habitat, the Christmas Cactus grows as an epiphyte. An epiphyte is a plant that grows on the surface of another plant and derives its moisture and nutrients from the air, rain, water, or debris accumulating around it. An epiphyte is not a parasite as it relies on the other plant only for physical support and does not derive its food from the host plant.

CARE:

In caring for the *Schlumbergera*, you will want to keep it indoors in a pot with well-draining soil. Since it is a tropical plant, it cannot tolerate cold temperatures. Give it bright, indirect natural light, as too much light can stress the plant. It does not require a lot of water. Soak the plant and then let the top inch of soil dry out before watering again, as it is susceptible to root rot if it is over-watered. A general rule of thumb is to water it every 1-3 weeks.

A few months after flowering is done, begin using organic cactus plant food following instructions on the container. Do not fertilize during budding and flowering cycles.

TO MAKE YOUR CHRISTMAS CACTUS BLOOM:

With proper growing conditions (and a little luck!), the plant will bloom sometime between November and January. The Christmas Cactus is daylength sensitive, which means it flowers when daylength becomes shorter. It blooms more reliably when its length of light can be controlled by artificial light sources.

Assuming your plant hasn't already bloomed in the past six months, beginning in October or November, cut back on watering, give it 12-14 hours of darkness each day, and moderate light for the rest of the day. Keep the temperature a little cooler (50-65 degrees F), or increase the darkness time to compensate.

When buds form, gradually increase light and temperatures until you have resumed a normal routine. After the blooming period, let it rest again, keeping it in cool temperatures and watering infrequently until about the end of March.

COMMON PROBLEMS:

- **Bud drop before bloom:** Christmas cactus may drop flower buds for a few different reasons, including temperature changes, overwatering, and low humidity. Pests are not common, but mealybugs and soft brown scales can also cause bud drop.

- Wilting or limp leaves: Unfortunately, this can be due to either underwatering or overwatering. Use your finger to test the soil, and only water if the soil is dry one inch below the surface.
- Black or rotting stems Too much water.
- Dark red or pink leaves: This can occur when light is too intense. Also, when soil is too dry for an extended period of time.
- Pests: Mealybugs are small, white, soft-bodied, wingless insects that hide in the joints of plants as well as the soil. They are essentially sap-suckers that release gooey honeydew, drying out and eventually killing your plant. A 70% or less solution of isopropyl (rubbing) alcohol in water may be dabbed directly on mealybugs with a cotton swab to kill them or remove them. Repeat once a week as needed until the infestation is gone. For more information on mealybugs, visit:
<https://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74174.html>

PRUNING & PROPAGATION

If you want a bushier, less leggy plant, you may cut back your Christmas cactus in late spring. Any healthy stems can be rooted for new plants. Christmas cactus is one of the simplest plants to propagate. Use clippers or your hand to pinch and twist a segment off at a joint. You can root Christmas cactus cuttings in either water or by placing cuttings a quarter of their length into a mixture of coarse sand and perlite or peat.

With proper, consistent care, a holiday cactus can last for decades. There are plants that have been passed through generations for 30, 40, or 50 years. I think I'll give this plant another try. I probably overwatered it.

The Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardeners will answer your questions in person:

November 18 - Hofman's Nursery Plant Clinic, 12491 W Lacey, Hanford, 10 am – 1 pm

November 18 – Visalia Farmers Market, Tulare Co. Courthouse North parking lot, 8 - 11 am

November 18 - Wreath Making Class, Tulare Public Library, 475 North M Street Tulare, 11 am - 12 pm

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30;

Kings County: (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m

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