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A Holiday Tradition: The Christmas Cactus

by Lydia Holley

What could be more cheerful during the holidays than a blooming Christmas cactus? Whether you choose a red, pink or white blooming Christmas cactus, its bright blooms will bring joy to both the owner and the visitor.



In order to bloom, the Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera x buckleyi*) needs to have lower temperatures, drier conditions and less light than it gets in the summer. Usually, this can be achieved easily with the naturally lower temperatures and shorter days of winter. You may not have to do anything special in order to get your Christmas cactus to bloom on time, especially if you place your Christmas cactus in a north or east facing window.

However, if you have trouble, you can address its needs by making certain the plant receives 12 to 13 hours of darkness each night. It takes six to eight weeks for the Christmas cactus to set flower buds. Therefore, in order to have your blooms timed perfectly for the Christmas season, you will want to start this process at the end of September or the first part of October. You may put the plant in a dark closet each night or simply cover it. You will also wish to decrease its watering schedule, only watering when the top inch of soil is dry. It should respond by exhibiting beautiful blooms at precisely the perfect time for your holiday gatherings. You can quit covering it or moving it to the closet after buds have formed.

If you have recently acquired a Christmas cactus, don't despair if all its buds drop off. This is most likely caused from it being moved from a humid greenhouse to the drier conditions in a home. Next year it should flower for you because it will become acclimated to your home's environment. If it continues to drop blooms, you will need to increase your home's humidity, or you can try setting the plant on a tray of pebbles placed in a small amount of water.

After your Christmas cactus has bloomed in winter, you may fertilize it. You may also place it outside in the spring and summer after all danger of frost has passed. Be certain to bring it indoor before the first frost of the winter season.

You may also wish to prune it after blooming by simply pinching several sections of the stems back. This will encourage your Christmas cactus to branch out, growing fuller each year.

Christmas cactus is considered an easy houseplant to grow. Most of the time, problems such as leaves dropping are caused by soil that is too wet, air that is too dry, or winter temperatures that are too high. The room where you keep it should be kept at 70 degrees or cooler in the winter, if possible. It also likes to be pot-bound, so be careful when transplanting it that you do not give it too much room. Be certain to wait until it has

completed its bloom cycle for the year before transplanting, and use a lightweight potting soil that is rich in nutrients, such as an African Violet potting mix.

If you like having a Christmas cactus blooming during the holidays, you may also like growing a Thanksgiving cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*) or an Easter cactus (*Hatiora gaertneri*), which should bloom, not surprisingly, around Thanksgiving or Easter.

For more information, email hendersonCMGA@gmail.com or call 903-675-6130.