

## CHRISTMAS CACTUS CARE AND INFORMATION



While the poinsettia remains the most popular of the holiday plants, a healthy Christmas cactus in full bloom is a great gift idea for that special gardener. They are easy to care for and can be grown indoors throughout the year. The flowers range in color from yellow, salmon, pink, fuchsia and white or combinations of those colors.

- **Common name** ~ Christmas Cactus
- **Scientific name** ~ *Schlumbergera bridgesii*
- **Origin** ~ A group of epiphytic cacti native to the South American jungles
- **Light** ~ While the Christmas cactus can adapt to low light, more abundant blooms are produced on plants that have been exposed to high light intensity. Keep your plants in a sunny location indoors. Plants can be moved outdoors in summer, but keep them in a shady or semi-shady location. Too much direct sunlight can burn the leaves. 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. If you want to grow it indoors in a south or west window, you should shade the plant with glass curtains. No diffusion of light is needed on the north or east. Many growers move the plants to the broken shade of a porch or patio or plunge the pot in a shady spot in the garden during the summer months. Christmas cactus needs shading from the sun between May and September.
- **Soil** ~ Well-drained soil is a must for Christmas cactus. Use a commercially packaged potting mix for succulent plants or mix your own. The ideal soil for Christmas cactus is composed of equal parts of garden loam, leaf mold and clean coarse sand (not sand from the seashore). Add a quart of wood ashes per bushel of mixture. One-tenth part by bulk of old dry cow manure may be added if garden soil is poor.
- **Water** ~ The plant is not a true cactus and is not quite as drought tolerant as the name infers. However, it is a succulent plant and can store a reasonable quantity of water in the leaves. Water thoroughly when the top half of the soil in the pot feels dry to the touch. The length of time between watering will vary with the air temperature, amount of light, rate of growth and relative humidity. During the summer, water so that the soil is continually moist. When fall arrives, water the plant only well enough to prevent wilting.

During the month of October, give the plant no water. Cautiously resume watering in November, but don't let stems get flabby from over watering. If the atmosphere is dry, place pot on a tray of pebbles. Keep pebbles moist with water in the tray.

After plant completes blooming, let it rest by withholding water for six weeks. When new growth appears, re-pot and top-dress with fresh soil. Resume watering to keep soil fairly moist.

- **Fertilizing** ~ As tender growth appears in the spring; apply a weak solution of liquid houseplant fertilizer at 2 to 3 weeks.

- **Temperature** ~ Prefers warm temperatures, although evening temperatures of 50 to 55 degrees F can be used to initiate flower bud formation (which normally is responsive to day length). From October on, keep the plant where it is cool at night (60 to 65 F). Keep away from drafts from heat vents, fireplaces or other sources of hot air.

- **Propagation** ~ Shady conditions or filtered light are necessary for Christmas cactus to thrive. You can force bloom by setting the plant in a cool (60 to 65 degrees F) location, where the light is low but not absent during the day. Do this soon for Christmas bloom. Do not let the soil dry completely, but water infrequently to keep the soil just moist. Watch for signs of buds at the ends of the leaves, and increase humidity and light when they appear. If buds appear too soon, hold them back by reducing the temperature.

The Christmas Cactus is easily propagated by taking short Y-shaped cuttings of the stem tips. A well-tended cactus will reach unmanageable size in time. To root cuttings for new plants, cut back shoots from the tips, cut at the second joint of each tip. Place cuttings in a moist peat and perlite, or peat and sand mixture. Water sparingly at first to prevent rotting of cuttings. After two or three weeks, water as you would any other cutting. When cuttings are rooted, pot them in a very loose mixture of good potting soil.

- **Re-potting** ~ Plants should be re-potted every two or three years, or whenever pot is filled with roots and the soil appears to be depleted of nutrients. Christmas cactus usually is re-potted in the spring, but a plant which is unhealthy because of the root system can be re-potted at any time of the year.

- **Bud Dropping** ~ Common causes of bud dropping are over watering, exposure to cold drafts, a position too close to a hot radiator or vent and lack of sufficient potash in the soil. Water plant sparingly and feed a little liquid manure weekly.

- **How to get your Christmas Cactus to flower** ~ These plants are easy to grow but are sometimes difficult to get to bloom. A medium light intensity and a soil high in organic matter are recommended. Do not allow the plant to dry out, water when the soil surface begins to feel dry. The plant may be kept drier in fall. Any fertilizer may be used according to label directions. Cool temperatures or long nights are required to induce blooming. The plants bloom when given night temperatures near 55 degrees and day temperatures below 65 degrees.

Flowering is related to day length and night time temperatures. The temperature range for flower bud development is between 55 and 60 degrees for a period of six weeks. As long as the temperatures remain in this range they will develop buds regardless of day length. If the temperatures in your home get above that required range, the plant will need 13 hours of uninterrupted darkness each night. One can do this by placing them in a completely dark room, or by covering them for the recommended time, or longer, each night with a dark piece of cloth. Or just keep the plants in total darkness like a closet till buds develop. For holiday blooms this usually means in late September to mid October.

During flower bud formation, stop fertilizing and only water enough to keep the leaves from becoming shriveled. Once buds do form then you can keep the plant in normal light and

temperatures. Keep it evenly moist and fertilize every other week with a mild fertilizer solution.

### **The general schedule of the ideal life of a Christmas Cactus**

- **Jan** ~ Flowering.
- **Feb to Mar** ~ Resting (55 degrees, infrequent watering).
- **Apr to May** ~ Water thoroughly when potting mix begins to dry out.
- **Jun to Aug** ~ Place outdoors in a shady spot.
- **Sept to Oct** ~ Plant prepares to flower. Reduce length daylight hours. Keep on the dry side and cool (55 to 60 degrees F) until flower buds form. Then increase water and temperature.
- **Nov to Dec** ~ Flowering. Water normally. Temperature no less than 55 degrees F.