Holiday cacti grow and flower best when the roots are a little cramped. They do not need to be repotted annually. Repotting is only necessary when the soil becomes compacted or the plants have completely outgrown their containers. The best time to repot holiday cacti is spring or early summer (when the plants are no longer blooming).

Propagation
Holiday cacti are easy to propagate. Sections of stem root easily and readily. In May or June, remove a section of the plant consisting of 2 to 5 stem segments. Pinch or cut off the section at a joint. Leave it out overnight to dry. This will allow the cut end to form callous tissue. Insert the cut end of the stem about 1 inch deep in moist perlite. Water it well. Place the rooting container in a clear plastic bag, seal it, and set it in a location that receives indirect light. Keep the perlite moist. If excessive moisture collects inside the plastic bag, remove the bag and allow it to dry out before placing it back over the cuttings. Cuttings should root in about 6 to 8 weeks. When the roots are one inch or longer, plant the cuttings in a small pot containing a well-drained potting soil. With luck, your new plant will flower the first year.

For more information
If you want to learn more about horticulture through training and volunteer work, ask your local Iowa State University Extension office for information about the ISU Extension Master Gardener program. For more information on plant selection, cultural practices, and environmental quality, contact your local Iowa State University Extension office or visit these Web sites:

ISU Extension publications
www.extension.iastate.edu/store

ISU Horticulture
www.yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu

Reiman Gardens
www.reimangardens.iastate.edu

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... and justice for all
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Many families have heirlooms, including plants, that are passed down from generation to generation. Occasionally we hear about a holiday cactus that has been in a family for years. The reason these plants enjoy such a long life is because they are easy to grow. They thrive on benign neglect, have few insect and disease problems, and don’t require frequent repotting.

**Types of holiday cacti**

The plants we often call Christmas cacti may be one of three types of cacti. Although the three groups are similar in appearance, they have distinct, unique characteristics.

The Thanksgiving cactus is probably the most familiar and widely grown species. Botanically, it is *Schlumbergera truncata* (formerly classified as *Zygocactus truncatus*). Other common names of this species are crab or yoke cactus. Thanksgiving cacti are available from various businesses in early fall through Christmas. The flower colors range from white through red, lavender, and salmon-orange—with many shades of each. The leaf margins of the Thanksgiving cactus bear two to four sawtoothed, upward pointing projections on the sides of the stem. The flowering period is generally from about Thanksgiving through the Christmas season.

The true Christmas cactus, *Schlumbergera bridgesii*, has leaf margins that are rounded with scallops (usually four) along the edges of the stems. The arching branches produce 3-inch-long, rosy-red flowers from late December through March.

The Easter cactus, *Rhipsalidopsis gaertnerii*, sets buds from January to March and blooms from March through May with pink or red flowers. It may bloom again in early fall. The leaf margins of Easter cacti are smoother than the other seasonal cacti, with 4 to 6 slight ripples along their edges, and brownish hair-like bristles at their tips.

These holiday cacti have their origins in the forests of South America. They are epiphytic plants, which means they live on another plant but are not parasitic. They grow in the crotches of trees and derive their nutrition from the heavy jungle rains, decaying organic matter, and filtered sunlight.

The branches of these cacti are best described as flattened stem segments or phylloclades. They are often incorrectly called leaves but these plants don’t have true leaves. The stems consist of small cushiony sections called “areoles” which identify them as true cacti. On other cacti, spines and true leaves arise from the areoles.

The flowers on holiday cacti are formed on the tips of the segments.

**Culture**

Holiday cacti are not demanding plants. All three groups require similar growing conditions. However, the Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti depend on short daylengths and cool temperatures to set flower buds, while Easter cacti will bloom with cool temperatures at the normal seasonal daylength.

Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti are short-day plants. To ensure that the plants bloom around Thanksgiving or Christmas, place them in a spare bedroom or basement where no artificial lights are used at night. The plants should receive bright light during the day and the temperature should be kept cool, under 65°F. Some Christmas and Thanksgiving cacti will bloom if kept at 55°F during the fall, regardless of daylength.

Keep the plants a bit on the dry side until you see pinpoint buds forming, then resume normal watering. Once buds have formed, you do not need to continue the short-day treatment. However, you do need to keep the soil moderately moist, give them bright light, and maintain a cool temperature (60° to 70°F) to avoid bud drop.

Epiphytic cacti require a well-drained potting soil. A commercial potting soil can be used if it drains well. The branches of holiday cacti may become limp and shriveled if grown in a compacted, poorly drained soil.

Although a member of the cactus family, a holiday cactus should not be kept dry like its relatives. Keep the soil moderately moist. Fertilize them monthly during the summer months with a soluble fertilizer. During the summer, you can move them outdoors to a partially shady location.