



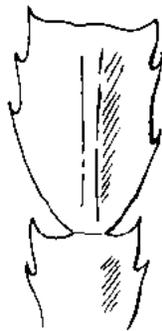
Growing Holiday Cacti

Many families have heirlooms that are passed down from generation to generation. One cherished item for some is the holiday cactus. Plants have been in some families for 50 or more years. The long life of these plants is due to the fact they are easy to grow. They thrive on benign neglect, have few insect and disease problems, and don't require frequent repotting.

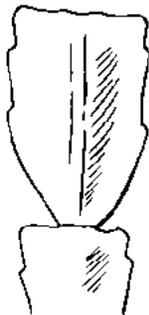
Types of holiday cacti

Three types of cacti are sometimes referred to as Christmas or holiday cacti. The three types are similar in appearance, but have distinctive 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 greenhouses and other retailers in early fall through the Christmas season. Flower colors range from white to red, lavender, and salmon-orange—with many shades of each. The stem segments of the Thanksgiving cactus bear 2-4 upward-pointing teeth. The flowering period is generally from mid-November to late December.

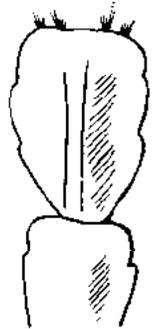


The true Christmas cactus, *Schlumbergera bridgesii*, has stem segments with scalloped edges. The arching branches produce three-inch, rosy-red flowers from late November to early February.



There are also a number of hybrid cultivars (*Schlumbergera* hybrids). The physical characteristics and bloom time of some cultivars most closely match those of the Thanksgiving cactus, while other cultivars more closely resemble the Christmas cactus. Some have an intermediate appearance.

The Easter cactus, *Hatiora gaertneri* (formerly *Rhipsalidopsis gaertneri*), blooms from March through May with pink or red flowers. It may bloom again in early fall. The stem segments of Easter cacti are smoother than the other seasonal cacti, with 4-6 slight ripples along their edges, and brownish hair-like bristles at their tips.



Holiday cacti are native to 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 water and nutrients from rains and decaying organic matter.

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 flowers on holiday cacti are formed on the tips of the phylloclades.

Culture

Holiday cacti are not demanding plants. All three types require similar growing conditions and bloom in response to day length (photoperiod) and temperature.



Photo courtesy of Cindy Haynes

Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti are short-day plants. Short day lengths and cool temperatures are needed for flower formation. To ensure the plants bloom around Thanksgiving or Christmas, place them in a spare bedroom or basement where electric lights are not on 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 in fall, regardless of day length.

Keep the plants a bit on the dry side until buds begin to form, then resume normal watering. Once buds have formed, there is no need to continue the short-day treatment. However, keep the soil moderately moist, give them bright light, and maintain a cool temperature (60-70°F) to avoid bud drop.

Getting Easter cacti to flower is a trickier process compared to the requirements of Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti. Easter cacti require specific day lengths and temperatures. Easter cacti, like Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti, need short days in fall. Two different temperature regimes are required during the short day period. Easter cacti require temperatures of 60-70°F for 3-4 weeks during the first phase. Temperatures should be 47-55°F for 4-6 weeks in the second phase. After the short day and cooling requirement have been met, plants should be grown under longer days in a room with a temperature of 60-70°F and artificial lights operating during the evening.

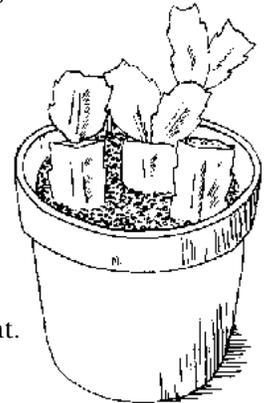
Epiphytic cacti require well-drained potting soils. A commercial potting mix can be used if it drains well. Holiday cacti may become limp if grown in a poorly drained potting soil.

Although a member of the cactus family, a holiday cactus should not be kept dry like its relatives. Keep the potting soil moderately moist. Fertilize plants once or twice a month in spring and summer with a dilute fertilizer solution. In late spring, plants can be moved outdoors to a partially shaded location.

Holiday cacti grow and flower best when kept potbound. Repotting is only necessary when the potting 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 not blooming) and are resuming active growth.

Propagation

Holiday cacti are easy to propagate, as stem segments root easily. In May or June, remove a section of the plant consisting of 2-5 stem segments or phylloclades. Pinch or cut off the section at a joint. Leave the cuttings on the counter overnight. This will allow the cut end to form callous tissue. Insert the cut end of the stem about one inch deep in moist perlite. After the cuttings have been inserted, water the perlite well and place the cuttings in bright, indirect light. Periodically water the perlite over the next several weeks to keep the material moist. The cuttings should root in about 6-8 weeks. When the roots are one inch or longer, plant the cuttings in a small pot containing a well-drained potting mix. With luck, the new plant will flower the first year.



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