

The Story Behind My Heritage Plant

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PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson

The Christmas Cactus is an attractive plant to have all year, but the real magic occurs when it blooms. Those showy flowers bring joy and color to the winter season when it's most needed.

This week's article is about passalong plants. The term "passalong plants" was popularized by a similarly titled book published in 1993 by Felder Rushing. Gardeners have been passing along plants for generations before the practice received a formal name.

Gardeners have amazing generosity when it comes to their plants. Gardeners have always passed along plants—we're a generous group who dislike tossing a per-

fectly good plant onto the compost heap if we can provide it with a good home. Admire a blooming "whatever-it's-called" in someone's garden and they will likely place some cuttings of that plant into your empty hands. I've seen that happen many times when Master Gardener volunteers hold meetings in a backyard.

Over the past 30+ years as a Horticulture Agent, Master Gardeners have shared a plethora of their

plants with me. Loretta Osteen, a Master Gardener and regionally renowned grower of plumeria, fed my collection of plumeria. She even passed along a variety of plumeria known as Texas Aggie that produces maroon-colored flowers.

Laura Bellmore is also a Master Gardener and has a large patch of pink rain lilies in her landscape. She shared some of her bulbs and I now have my own patch of pink



rain lilies that produces an eye-catching display after a heavy rain.

In a discussion with a small gathering of Master Gardeners a few months ago, I mentioned my goal of adding additional rain lilies to enlarge my rain lily beds. Last week I was surprised by the gifting of several bags of rain lilies shared by Master Gardener Debbie Brizendine who was cleaning out a bed of overgrown rain lilies and wanted to share her extras.

So, why did I entitle this column “Heritage Plants” instead of passalong plants? Because I and several of my Master Gardener friends felt that the term heritage plants confers a very special meaning to these plants going well beyond the acts of kindness involved with most passalong plants. My first nomination for a heritage plant would be a Christmas Cactus—not just any Christmas Cactus but Clara’s Christmas Cactus.

It’s so-named because it belonged to, and was nurtured by Mrs. Clara B. Johnson, my mother who passed almost eight years ago. My mother received her Christmas Cactus from her mother (my maternal grandmother) on May 30, 1945, as a wedding gift. With the assistance of Google, I did a quick calculation of time since that date and it turns out the origin of the plant that is now under my care dates back to over 75 years. While this plant itself is not 75 years old, it is from cuttings of the original plant given to my mother. I re-

member my mother saying that she had made cuttings 2 or 3 times and I know that the plant I have is at least 22 years old.

After my mother passed, I accepted responsibility for caring for the plant. I did not take this responsibility lightly as I knew my professional reputation as a horticulturist would be on the line with my seven siblings if I did not succeed in keeping the Christmas Cactus alive. (I had an emergency Fake Plan B that involved buying a new Christmas Cactus in full bloom every Christmas to keep up the image).

I managed to keep the original plant alive over the next five years after I brought it home to Texas. Then I asked Mary Gonzalez and Lisa Belcher, who are also Master Gardeners with expertise on plant propagation, to repot and bump up the original plant.

This they did and the rest is history. Last year, Clara’s Christmas Cactus produced 38 blooms and this Christmas it has produced 63 blooms. So, even though 2020 has been a dismal year in many respects with the COVID-19 pandemic, I have solace and a ray of hope when Clara’s Christmas Cactus produced yet another bountiful and delightful abundance of blooms for the holiday season.

The name of Clara’s Christmas Cactus was given by the Master Gardeners who repotted the original plant and who asked permis-

sion to make several cuttings for distribution to other Master Gardeners. So, the moniker of heritage plants that describes a special plant received from a special family member would seem more fitting and emotive than just passalong plants. Heritage plants serve as an ongoing reminder of a very special person in our life. Each time we get to admire the heritage plants in our own garden or home interior, we can also recall fond memories of that person.

Since Clara’s Christmas Cactus sits on a corner of my office desk with an afternoon sun exposure, I am often inspired to recall fond memories of my mother and her love of flowering plants.

Clearly, the 2020 holiday season will be unlike any other in modern history. People are finding all sorts of ways to connect, celebrate and reflect over the holiday season. The poet Mary Oliver said, “Keep some room in your heart for the unimaginable.” That seems just right for this holiday season.

