

CARE OF CHRISTMAS CACTUS



Hybridization over the past century has resulted in the introduction of many new varieties of Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter cactus. These plants are members of the Zygo-cactus family; most of which are native to Central and South America. Although these plants are called cacti, they are truly different in all aspects from the common desert cactus with which we are all familiar. These plants, called epiphytes are found in the same environments as orchids. They are most often found in the forks of tree limbs where they grow in decayed leaves and other natural debris that accumulates there. Since they are tropical cacti, their cultural requirements are totally different from true cacti. So here are a few ideas on how to care for them and the steps to follow to get them into bloom for the upcoming holiday season.

In September and October, Christmas cactus plants should be kept in a cool room where temperatures will remain around 50 degrees, give or take a few degrees. Be sure not to expose them to freezing temperatures. It's also very important they be kept in a room where no artificial light will be turned on at night.

Actually the key to getting Christmas cactus to flower during the holiday season, is the proper light exposure, correct temperatures and limited watering. So during the fall months, the Christmas cactus should be placed in a spot where it receives indoor indirect bright light during the daylight hours but total darkness at night. (Much the same exposure you would give a poinsettia except a Christmas poinsettia requires warm temperatures whereas the Christmas cactus needs a spot where the temperatures are cool during the fall months.)

Since the Christmas cactus is a tropical plant it will require watering on much the same basis as any other type of tropical plant. A good procedure to follow is to water the plants thoroughly and then allow about the top inch of soil to dry before watering again. However, during the fall and winter months, the plants should be watered less frequently in order to get them to bloom.

Christmas cactus requires about 50 to 60 percent humidity. So it's a good practice to place a glass, vase or tray of water near the plant. As the water evaporates it will provide the humidity the cactus needs. A humidity tray is another method of providing the humidity the Christmas cactus requires. This is done by filling a waterproof saucer with gravel, then adding water halfway up the gravel. Place the pot on the gravel surface.

The Christmas cactus should never be placed near a door that opens and closes to the outside. Likewise, keep it away from heating ducts or near the fireplace or drafty areas.

In late October or early November, make an application of a 0-10-10 type liquid fertilizer. A second application of this fertilizer can be made in February. During the growing season from April through September, fertilize the plants with an all purpose liquid houseplant type fertilizer. The fertilizer you use should have a nitrogen ratio of no higher than 10 percent. Of the three numbers on a fertilizer container, the first number is nitrogen.

How do the professionals get Christmas cactus into bloom for the holiday season? They keep them in cool greenhouses where the temperatures average approximately 50 degrees and where the plants receive between 12 and 14 hours of total darkness each day and watering is done sparingly.

One of the most frustrating things that can happen to Christmas cactus is after the flower buds have developed they drop off the plant. Bud drop can be caused by anyone of several different conditions. Usually it's because of over-watering, lack of humidity or insufficient light.

After The Christmas holiday season, the Christmas cactus should be given about a 30 day rest. Again place it in a cool room and provide limited water. Don't worry if it loses a few leaves or joints and appears weak during this rest period.

This is not the time to pinch, prune or shape a Christmas cactus. The best time is when the new growth begins in March or early April.

Likewise, the best time for repotting a cactus is in February, March or April. However, keep in mind the plant will flower best if it's kept in a container where it's pot-bound. If your Christmas cactus is given proper care and is placed in the right location, it's not unusual for it to flower several times throughout the year.