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Looking for a reliable flowering plant in the dark days of winter? Christmas cacti will light up your holiday hearth with bloom year after year.

Holiday Colour Guaranteed

By Larry Hodgson

There are a variety of Christmas plants on the market but most of them are designed to be one-shot wonders. You buy them in bloom, but they won't bloom again, or, if they do, they're definitely less spectacular the second time around and you usually end up buying new ones each year. But there is one exception: the Christmas cactus. This is the one Christmas plant that actually gets better every year.

A Most Unusual Cactus

Of course, the Christmas cactus (schlumbergera, formerly zygocactus) is not your usual cactus. It doesn't have the barrel-shaped stem and numerous spines of the conventional cactus, nor does it grow under arid conditions.

Somewhere along the evolutionary line, the Christmas cactus' ancestors moved from the arid desert to the humid jungle and adopted an epiphytic lifestyle. In other words, they became tree-dwellers. They lost their sharp spines (there are fewer animals to protect against up in trees) and their fat stems became flattened and thinner, although they still store some water during times of drought. Even their flowers changed, from the cup shape of the average cacti to almost tubular blooms, the shape their primary pollinators – hummingbirds – prefer.

Christmas cacti are curious plants to look at. They are leafless, yet don't look it, as people mistake their flat green stems for leaves. The stems carry out photosynthesis, a job carried out by leaves in most other plants. The stems are in the form of segments, with new segments growing from the tips of old ones, like links in a chain. The stems typically grow upwards at first and then arch outward and even downward as they mature.

Bloom Time

In Brazil, where all six species grow wild, schlumbergera is called "flor de maio" (May flower) as it blooms in the spring or early summer, yet in our Canadian homes, it blooms in late fall or winter. What gives?

Christmas cacti are programmed by nature to bloom when days are short. That would be spring in the Southern Hemisphere, but fall in the Northern Hemisphere. And they won't bloom at all at the equator where days are of equal length. Don't put your Christmas cactus in a room that is brightly lit at night or it may never bloom!

When I was young, I was told to put my Christmas cactus under a box or in a closet at night from mid-September on (from about 4pm-8am) if I wanted bloom at Christmas, but it's really not quite as complicated as that. If you place your plant in a spot that does not receive artificial light at night, it will naturally receive short days and begin to bloom. I like to put mine in the guest room and remove any light bulbs so I can't accidentally turn the light on and spoil its flowering, but many people simply keep theirs in the living room, but behind another plant so no artificial light reaches it.

Following a first bloom in late fall, many Christmas cactus will re-bloom in February or March: it's the continued short days typical of our northern latitude that causes this second flowering.

Ah… but will Christmas cactus bloom at Christmas? That's a very different story.

Thanksgiving Cactus or Christmas Cactus?

Almost all schlumbergera cacti seen in Canada today are hybrids derived from two species – *Schlumbergera russelliana* and *S. truncata* – and are generally referred to by the name *S.* x *buckleyi*.

S. russelliana is the traditional Christmas cactus and will naturally bloom in mid- to late December, in time for Christmas. However, *S. truncata* blooms earlier, in mid- to late November and is often called the Thanksgiving cactus, as it blooms around the time of American Thanksgiving. Depending on which parent dominates, your cactus will either bloom naturally at Christmas or in late November.

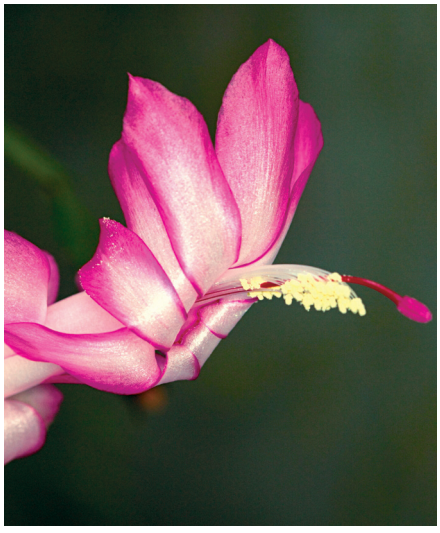
You can tell which type is which by looking at their stems. The Christmas types (called the Buckleyi Group) have long, arching, hanging stems with rounded teeth; the Thanksgiving types

LARRY HODGSON PHOTO

These white flowers (here on a Thanksgiving cactus, Schlumbergera *x* buckleyi *Truncata Group) will be fairly pink when grown in cool conditions.*

LARRY HODGSON PHOTO

*The short, broad segments with distinctly pointed teeth tell you this is a Thanksgiving cactus (*Schlumbergera *x* buckleyi *Truncata Group). It will normally bloom in November, well before Christmas.*



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Low levels of light promote blooms.

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Yellow Schlumbergera truncata *blossom*

DID YOU KNOW?

Some people put their Christmas cactus outdoors in the summer (in a fairly shady spot, of course) and leave them there until frost threatens. Depending on your climate, this can help delay blooming until the holiday season.

LARRY HODGSON PHOTO

Schlumbergera *x* buckleyi *Truncata Group 'Gold Charm' is one of the rare yellow varieties available. It will bloom in November.*

LARRY HODGSON PHOTO

Like most Schlumbergera *x* buckleyi *sold today, this plant is a Thanksgiving cactus (Truncata Group).*

*This Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera *x* buckleyi *Buckleyi Group) has been handed down in the same family for over 50 years.*

(the Truncata Group) are back-crossed to *S. truncata* and have more upright stems with distinctly pointed teeth.

It used to be that most Christmas cacti sold in Canada really did bloom at Christmas, but the arching stems of the Christmas types are hard to pack and ship, so retailers now rarely offer them. Just about any holiday cactus sold these days will be of the shorter, upright Thanksgiving type, easy to ship, but likely to bloom well before Christmas.

LARRY HODGSON PHOTOS

*The distinctly trailing stems with rounded teeth show that this is a true Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera *x* buckleyi *Buckleyi Group). It blooms faithfully at Christmas every year.*

Nurserymen delay the bloom of their Thanksgiving cacti by keeping them under cool conditions (below 16°C/61°F). They then sell them in full bloom for Christmas. Of course, when you grow it, your cactus will disappoint by flowering too early the following year. If you have a cool room (daytime temperatures below 16°C), you can force your Thanksgiving cacti to bloom late as well, but most of us have to put up with... Christmas in November! Personally, I can live with that. After all, a beautiful flowering plant is a beautiful flowering plant, regardless of when it blooms.

Basic Care

Christmas cacti are long-lived, easy-to-grow houseplants, tolerant of neglect. I know people who have plants over 50 years old that still bloom up a storm every year! Grow them under "typical" indoor conditions and you should have equal luck.

This means they need bright light with some direct sunlight, preferably in the morning. Too much light, such as in front of a south-facing window in summer, will result in stems with a reddish tint. Too little light and your plants will be nicely green, but won't bloom.

Keep the growing mix evenly moist throughout the year: the idea that Christmas cacti need a period of drought in order to bloom is an old myth that is hard to shake. A light, well-aerated potting mix will help achieve the air circulation the roots require, but don't repot too often: they seem to do best when distinctly underpotted for their size.

Normal air humidity – and even dry air! – is acceptable, but they'll do best in humid air: after all, they originally come from a very humid climate. Don't overfeed, either. A quarter dose of any houseplant fertilizer, applied as recommended during the spring to summer growing season, will be sufficient. Indoor temperatures are fine as well, but, as mentioned, cooler fall temperatures can be used to help delay the bloom of Thanksgiving cacti. If necessary, these plants will take temperatures close to freezing.

You can multiply Christmas cacti very readily by stem cuttings, especially if you take them in spring or summer (fall and winter cuttings can be slow to root). Simply twist off (don't cut) short pieces of stem composed of 1-3 segments, then let them dry for a day or two. Insert the bottom end into a moist growing mix, and you're off to the races.

Finally, Christmas cacti rarely suffer from insects or diseases, but rot from overwatering, especially under low light, is possible. If you find your plant seeming to wilt but the soil is moist, it may be suffering from rot. You can usually save it by taking a stem cutting.

Choices

There are hundreds of Christmas cactus cultivars in a wide range of shades, from the reds and magentas of the original species to all sorts of pinks and whites, yellows and bi-colours. Many will change in colour according to temperature, with the whites and yellows becoming quite pink under cool conditions. However, don't expect to find labelled cultivars on the market: Christmas cacti are inevitably sold in mixed lots with no identification whatsoever. If you want to know what colour you have, you must buy them in bloom.

Easy, tough and floriferous, Christmas cacti are probably the best holiday plant to offer any gardener! What other Christmas plant will bloom again and again every year for a half-century or more?❀