

Holiday Cactus: An Easy Plan to Grow and Share

There's no doubt that poinsettias are the king of holiday plants. But when I think of holiday plants, there is another that brings back memories of Christmases past.

Christmas wasn't Christmas until we went to Grandmama's for dinner (the noon time meal not supper). Almost every year, the benches and shelves on her back porch were filled with blooming Christmas cacti and more could be found inside. Yes, in Darlington, South Carolina, it was often warm enough on Christmas Day for them to be still outside.

Holiday cacti are very easy to grow and make great gifts for the green thumbs on your gift list. There are two types of holiday cacti: the Thanksgiving and the Christmas Cacti. (There's also an Easter Cactus, but that's for another time.) Both plants are in the genus *Schlumbergera* named after a French nurseryman and cactus collector, Frederick M. Schlumber.

These plants are native to the Organ Mountains of Brazil. In their native environment, they are found growing attached to trees. Plant breeding has allowed the release of many cultivars that provide a wide selection of flower colors and shapes.

Holiday cacti are not demanding plants. Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti depend on short day lengths and cool temperatures to set flower buds, while Easter cacti will bloom with cool temperatures at the normal seasonal day length.

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 day length.

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.

Another characteristic of holiday cacti is that they are easy to propagate and share with others.