

Christmas Cactus

The Christmas cactus is a hybrid that was produced in the late 1840s at the Rollisson Nurseries in England. It is from the *Schlumbergera* family that is native to the tropical jungles of the Americas and with other jungle natives of the family Cactaceae have also been called the "Jungle Cacti".

Christmas cactus is a member of a group sold as Holiday cacti that also includes Thanksgiving cactus and the Easter cactus. The difference is as follows:

Christmas Cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgessii*) – The Christmas cactus has scalloped stem segments (phylloclades) with no points and bloom from Thanksgiving to Christmas. These are also called True Cacti and the flowers are radially symmetrical (actinomorphic).

Thanksgiving Cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*) – The Thanksgiving cactus is also called the Crab or Yoke Cacti. Virtually identical to the Christmas cactus, except it has sharper points on its stem segments (phylloclades) and blooms earlier than the Christmas cactus. The flowers of this variety are asymmetrical (zygomorphic).

Easter Cactus (*Rhipsalidopsis gaertneri*) – The Easter cactus flowers usually once a year in the April timeframe. This plant is similar to the Christmas cactus but the flower is much different. It has thicker stem segments with no points and has soft bristles at each of its stem segments. This plant is more difficult to grow and has a habit of shedding its segments if the watering requirements are not just right. Also this plant may not decide to bloom one year for no apparent reason.



The Christmas cactus will keep its blossoms longer in cooler temperatures. Keep the plant in a well-lit location away from drafts from heat vents, fireplaces or other sources of hot air. Drafts and temperature fluctuations can cause flower buds to drop before they have a chance to open. The Christmas cactus is considered a tropical type plant, but it is not quite as drought tolerant as its desert relatives and may drop flower buds if the soil gets too dry and wilt when under drought stress. It needs to be planted in a well drained soil. If plant dries out too frequently, that is a signal that it needs to be repotted. Water thoroughly when the top inch or so of the soil feels dry to the touch.

This plant can adapt to low light but more abundant blooms are produced on plants that have been exposed to more light intensity. Indoors plants can be kept in a sunny location, but in the summer if they are outdoors, move to a filtered sunny area. Leaves will turn red if exposed to too much sunlight and direct full sun can actually burn the leaves and cause them to become limp.

Pruning after blooming will encourage the plant to branch out. The sections that you remove can be rooted in moist vermiculite or loose soil.

There are two ways to get a Christmas cactus to bloom. One way is to give it an uninterrupted dark period approximately 12 hours each night. Begin the dark treatments mid-October to have plants in full bloom by the holidays. Some people place their plants in a dark closet for 12 hours each night for 6 to 8 weeks or until they see the buds form.

The second way to encourage your Christmas cactus to bloom is if it is subjected to cooler temperatures of about 50 to 55 degrees F eliminating the need for the dark treatments. Plants will bloom for the holidays if cool treatments are started by early November.