

Holiday Cacti

By Valerie Jean Rose

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Persuading your holiday cacti to bloom

Temperatures are dropping, rain gauges are filling, and holiday preparations are on the horizon. This is the perfect time to induce indoor cacti to prepare to bloom during December holidays. These plants reward the patient houseplant gardener with cascades of blossoms in lipstick red, fuchsia or shell pink, even frosty white. Two types of flowering cacti are sold as houseplants, usually referred to as Christmas or Easter cacti. The Christmas cactus, *Zygocactus truncatus*, features leaves with pointed lobes and usually blooms from Thanksgiving through Christmas. *Schlumbergera bridgessii*, or Easter cactus, has wider, rounded leaves, typically flowering between Christmas and Easter.

First, a few words about the words used to name these tropical plants. Houseplants are non-denominational. *Zygocactus truncatus* usually blooms in November and December, both in homes where seven Chanukah candles glow in a menorah (a ceremonial candelabra) and in living rooms with a Christmas tree aglow with lights. *Schlumbergera bridgessii* can be found blooming at Easter, or during the major Jewish festival of Passover. Some garden writers, including Sandra Mason, Horticulture Educator at the Illinois Extension Service, refer to these plants collectively as holiday cacti. This is a matter of accuracy, not political correctness.

With attention and care, holiday cacti can be persuaded to bloom in time to add fresh color to your holiday gatherings. Holiday cacti are short day plants, which means they bloom when nights are at least 12 hours long —or when they're kept in darkness for at least 12 hours each day. Put your cacti in a dark closet for at least half the day. In 6 – 8 weeks, when flower buds begin to form, your plant can come out of the closet to join your celebrations. Since *Zygocactus truncatus* usually blooms in November and December, this is the time to ensure your holiday cacti experience total darkness at least half of each day. Your cacti should be blooming by mid-December, ready for holiday festivities.



A Christmas cactus handled with care can brighten your home for many years, perhaps even generations; this particular plant is over twenty years old. Stem segments are more rounded on an Easter cactus, which can also be called a Chain cactus. The blossoms will form at the new tips of the areoles. **Photos by Christine Farrow.**

Another way to persuade *Zygocactus truncatus* to bloom is to control the air temperature around your cacti. Place your plants in a cool room, with temperatures between 50 to 55 degrees F. This method eliminates the need for darkness treatments. For December blossoms, start the cool treatments soon. No flowers will form when the holiday cacti experiences night temperatures above 70 degrees, so turn down the thermostat, put on a sweater and enjoy more late-autumn blooms.

Once blooming, holiday cacti will do best in a well-lit location, protected from heat vents, fireplaces, and other sources of hot air. Drafts and temperature extremes can cause the flower buds to drop before they open.

Avoid overwatering your holiday cacti. Push your finger down into the soil; when the top inch or so feels dry, water thoroughly. The length of time between waterings will vary with the air temperature, amount of light, rate of growth and relative humidity. If your cactus tends to dry out or wilt frequently, it's time to repot the plant into a slightly larger container. Well-drained soil is essential for healthy cacti. Use a potting mix specifically made for succulent plants, or mix your own by combining two parts plain potting soil with one part clean sand or vermiculite.



Left and center - Originally found in the jungles of South America, the Christmas cactus has now been developed to include a wide range of colors from scarlet to pale pink. **Right** - Here in the Northwest, the Easter cactus may be moved outside in the late spring, where it's brightly colored blossoms will welcome returning hummingbirds. **Photos by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardener.**

You can move your holiday cacti outdoors in summer, but keep them in a shady or semi-shady location. Too much direct sunlight can actually burn the leaves. In the fall, bring the plants back inside a few hours each day until it's time to go into the closet (or experience cooler temperatures) to prepare for holiday blooming.

To keep your cacti from looking straggly, prune the plant once blooming is done. Remove a few sections of each stem by pinching them off with your fingers or cutting with a sharp knife. Push each segment into moist soil, and it will grow into another cactus. These starts make delightful gifts, especially if you include information about encouraging the gift plant to bloom.

RESOURCES:

- The Unexpected Houseplant, Tova Martin, Timber Press, Portland Oregon, 2012
- Christmas Cactus Care, Sandra Mason, Horticulture Educator, University of Illinois Extension Service: <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/cfiv/homeowners/011110.html>