

Caring for Your Holiday Cactus



BARTOW

Why do some holiday cacti bloom at Thanksgiving, while others bloom at Christmas and Easter?

Three different cacti are grown as "holiday" cacti: *Schumbergera truncata*, the Thanksgiving cactus; *Schumbergera bridgesii*, the Christmas cactus; and *Rhipsalidopsis gaertneri*, the Easter cactus. Christmas cacti have cladophylls, or joints, with two to three rounded teeth on the margin. Thanksgiving cacti have joints with two to four teeth on the margin. Easter cacti have joints with scalloped margins and bristles at the tips of the joints.

Don't be surprised if your Thanksgiving cactus is blooming right now. I have a Thanksgiving cactus that is in full bloom. Blooming depends to some extent on environmental conditions plus the care that the plant has received throughout the year.

Holiday cacti make excellent pot plants. Their pendulous growth makes them perfect for hanging baskets. The flowers, which are irregular, range in color from fuchsia to reds to pinks to white. The segmented leaf-like stems provide a unique texture to the plant.

- Light: Holiday cacti grow best in light shade. Indoor plants should be placed near a bright sunny window. Outdoors, plants should be placed under trees in filtered sun. I keep mine on my screened deck which has about 65 percent shade.

- Potting soil: Potting soil for holiday cacti must be well-drained and porous. Some potting mixtures that have been used successfully are: three parts peat moss and one part coarse builders sand; two parts peat moss and one part perlite; one part peat moss and one part vermiculite; and two parts peat moss, two parts orchid bark and one part coarse builders sand or perlite.

- Fertilizer: A soluble fertilizer should be applied every 10 to 30 days depending on light and rate of growth. The harsher the light or the more rapidly the plant is growing, the more frequently the fertilizer can be applied. Water and fertilizer may be reduced from August to flowering; after flowering and when new growth starts, it is very important to water and fertilize regularly, because next year's flowers are formed on new growth.

- Watering: Watering is important in producing healthy plants. Too little water or too much water will cause the plants to drop their flowers. The plants should be watered frequently, yet the soil should remain moist, not wet. Good drainage is important.

- Propagation: When flowers are pollinated, a seed pod will result. The seed pod is fleshy and turns a reddish color when ripe. To sow seeds, remove the black seeds from the fruit. Sow the seeds in a 50 percent peat, 50 percent vermiculate mix and keep warm and moist. Do not cover seed -- simply press into soil mix. Sprouting may take one to three months.

The most common method of propagation is cuttings consisting of 2 to 3 cladophyllis (joints). Cuttings should be removed from the plant and placed about a half inch deep in moist sand or potting soil. The use of a rooting powder or liquid is not essential, but will aid in root formation. Place cuttings in a warm, shady location until rooted.

- Mealybug infestations: The major pest of Schlumbergera is mealybugs. Slight infestations can be controlled by removing the pest with a toothpick or tweezers. Another method would be to carefully wash the plant with soapy water using a soft brush or cloth. Chemicals can be used in extreme cases.

- Chlorosis: The upper cladophylls (joints) may become chlorotic (yellowed), roughly in the center of the plant. The cause of this condition is not well known, but it is suspected that it is caused by low temperatures in late fall and early winter.

- Discoloration: At times, portions of the cladophylls turn purple, blue, or gray-green and are sometimes shriveled. This condition may be caused by root rot, but frequently results from soil with poor aeration or over-watering. Reduce the frequency of watering and improve soil aeration.

- Bud drop: Continued warm temperatures above 90 degrees Fahrenheit will cause some dropping of flower buds. Maintain a temperature below 90 F. Rapid changes in growing conditions, including light, water and temperature, can also cause bud drop.

- Disease: Disease is not a major problem, but over-watering may cause the development of rot. Therefore, it is important to use a well-drained media, a pot with drainage holes and careful monitoring of soil moisture.

For more information, call the Polk County Extension Office at 863-519-8677, extension 109.

Contributed by David Shibles, University of Florida IFAS Extension

Posted – Polk Voice - **December 20, 2006 1:54:27 PM**

Images



Holiday Cactus



Holiday Cactus