



Friday's Feature

By

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Holiday cactus creates a colorful display

While the poinsettia remains the most popular of the holiday plants, a healthy holiday cactus in full bloom is a great gift for that special person. This plant can live for many years and flower profusely in a variety of shades of pink, violet, orange, red and white.

Botanically, these plants are in the genus *Schlumbergera* and are true cacti but without the spines. They are native to the South American rain forest, where they grow on tree trunks and limbs alongside orchids and bromeliads. There are several different species, hybrids and cultivars.

These plants are called holiday cacti because their habit is to bloom around the time of one of three holidays - Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter. All will bloom at the appropriate times if grown under natural lighting conditions. However, they can be forced into blooming at Christmas if treated properly in October.

You can determine which holiday cactus you have by looking at its leaves. The Christmas cactus has leaf segments with rounded margins while the Thanksgiving cactus leaf segments have prominent teeth on the margin. The Easter cactus has tooth-like marginal notches with tiny spines or hairs on the leaf segments.



Most holiday cactus, even those purchased during the Christmas season, are *Schlumbergera truncate*, the Thanksgiving cactus. These plants bloom more readily than the true Christmas cactus and professional growers have perfected the art of forcing the plants to bloom for the Christmas market.

Caring for these plants is simple regardless of which type you have.

All holiday cacti require well-drained soil. These are epiphytic plants that, in their native environment, root into decaying organic debris trapped among tree branches or in rocky crevices on the ground. Therefore, they require an exceptionally coarse, well drained soil. If the soil holds too much water, the plant stems or roots will rot.

Watering is one of the keys to success with these plants. Allowing the soil to dry out will cause the flowers to drop. On the other hand, soil that is too wet will lead to disease problems. It's important to keep the soil moist but not wet. Water whenever the top inch of soil feels dry rather than on a fixed schedule. Water thoroughly, until water runs out the bottom. Afterward, pour out any water that accumulates in the saucer.

Fertilize every month or every two months, depending on the growth of the plant. If it's a fast grower, monthly fertilizer applications would be best. Soluble fertilizers or slow-release products are both acceptable.

Being tropical plants, these plants will do well outdoors most of the year in Northwest Florida. Move the plants to a protected location when there is a chance of frost.

Holiday cacti, like poinsettias and chrysanthemums, are short-day plants. They produce leaves when the days are long in the summer, and form flower buds in response to shorter and cooler days in the fall. Once the plant receives twelve to fourteen hours of uninterrupted darkness each day, flower buds will start to form. If these plants are exposed to any artificial light, like a streetlight, plants will not set flower buds.

To force them to bloom during the holiday season, begin moving the plant to a dark area from 5 p.m. to 8 a.m. each day beginning around the first of October. Flower buds should start to develop around the first of November and open between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

These tropical cacti are fun to grow and an easy holiday plant to get to rebloom.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.