

Christmas Cactus

Info Sheet

Christmas Cactus has been a favorite houseplant for about 150 years, when hybridizing of the many varieties of the genus *Schlumbergera* (formerly *Zygocactus*) began in England. It's not unusual for individual plants to be passed down from generation to generation because they're long-lived and rather easy to grow. Today, they are available in many colors including pink, peach, orange, red, lavender, purple, fuchsia and white.

The many varieties of holiday cactus are forest plants that are native to the foothills of the Organ Mountains in southeast Brazil. There they live as epiphytes (air plants) in cracks in the rocks with just enough organic material for the roots to cling to the ground or in the forks of tree limbs where they grow in decayed leaves and other natural debris that accumulates there.

Flowering

Flowering depends on the length of the day and the temperature. A plant will set buds when it gets cooler and when the length of day and night are about equal (December). Before and during flowering, care should be taken not to let the plant dry out; nor should it be moved. Under-watering and moving the plant can cause buds and blooms to drop.

Blooming also requires long uninterrupted dark periods, about 12 hours each night, beginning in about mid-October. Move your plant if it is hit by security or street lights at this time. Cooler temperatures also contribute to blooming, so earlier than usual and fuller blooms usually occur during colder winters.

Light

A Christmas Cactus will appreciate bright but indirect light. Keep the plant in a well-lit location away from direct sunlight (which can stunt growth and burn the leaves). Leaves may start to turn a bit red if exposed to excessive light.

Water

Christmas Cactus is a tropical plant, not quite as drought tolerant as its desert relatives and, in fact, may drop flower buds if the soil gets too dry. The plants will wilt and flower buds will drop when under drought stress. Water thoroughly when the top inch or so of soil feels dry to the touch. The length of time between waterings will vary with the air temperature, amount of light, rate of growth and relative humidity. Generally, water once or twice per week.

Too much watering will cause white rot to appear as spots on the leaves and the leaves will likely fall off. The soil should be evenly moist for best growth. The rule of thumb is, less water is better than too much.

Fertilize

During the growing season from April through September, fertilize 2 to 4 times at half strength with **Jack's Classic 20-20-20**, an all purpose liquid houseplant fertilizer. This is important to keep the plant in good condition; the joints are fragile and can break apart if the plant descends into poor health.

Repotting & Pruning

Prune the Christmas Cactus about a month after blooming. This will encourage the plant to branch out, especially after a period of "rest". It will not look very pretty after the blossoms have faded. Some people wait until March or so to prune, when new growth begins.

Likewise, the best time to repot a cactus is from February to April. However, keep in mind the plant will flower best if it's kept in a container where it's somewhat pot-bound. When repotting, use a well-draining soil since the roots are weak and will easily rot if the soil stays too wet.

If your plant tends to dry out and/or wilt frequently, it's probably time to repot it into a slightly larger container. Well-drained soil is a must for Christmas Cactus. Use **Cactus/Succulent Potting Mix**.

Pruning your Christmas cactus after blooming will encourage the plant to branch out. Remove a few sections of each stem by pinching them off with your fingers or cutting with a sharp knife. These sections can be rooted to propagate new plants.

Propagation

Propagate a Christmas Cactus by cutting off sections of the stem. Each section must consist of two or three joined segments. Allow each section to dry for a few hours before pushing them into the soil of a 3-inch pot that contains **Cactus/Succulent Potting Mix**. Plant halfway down the first segment. Treat the cuttings as mature plants. In about four to six weeks, the cuttings should have rooted and will begin to show some new growth. They grow quickly and should "take" in about two or three weeks. You can fertilize after the cuttings have grown one new segment.

Problems

If the cactus starts to shrivel in its rest period, it needs more water. Give it a good soak in a bowl or sink filled with water, allowing it to sit for about a half hour. Then lift it out and let it drain.

If the plant shrivels up and it is not due to being too dry, it may have crown rot. Crown rot is a sign that the roots are rotting. This means that either the plant has been over watered or that the soil mixture is wrong. The plant cannot survive this, so take cuttings from healthy stems before it is too late.

The logo for Rockledge Gardens features the name in a large, teal, serif font. The word "Rockledge" is on the top line and "Gardens" is on the bottom line, with a stylized teal leaf or wave graphic behind the letter 'G' in "Gardens".

Naturally beautiful and fun!

2153 U.S. Hwy # 1 • Rockledge, FL 32955
321.636.7662 • www.rockledgegardens.com