

# MESSENGER-INQUIRER



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**HORTICULTURE EDUCATION**  
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November 17, 2024

**Holiday Cacti Brings Cheer to the Season**  
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Holiday cacti are beautiful in bloom! They bring back many memories of relatives and friends proudly displaying these amazing plants. These plants make great gifts during the holiday season. In addition, they are easy to propagate and share.

The exotic birdlike flowers of the holiday cacti are beautiful. Colors of the flowers include shades of white, golden yellow, pink, rose, coral, and red. The gorgeous flowers make this plant a holiday favorite and a topic of conversation.

The holiday cactus may be referred to as Thanksgiving cactus and Christmas cactus. Both bloom during the holiday season and require the same growing conditions. Actually, most of the holiday cacti are the Thanksgiving or crab cactus. Its scientific name is *Schlumbergera truncata*. The true Christmas cactus is *Schlumbergera bridgesii*. The main difference between the two is the shape of the leaf-like stem segments. The edges of the segments of a Thanksgiving cactus are toothed or pointed; the Christmas cactus segments are smaller and have rounded lobes. The Thanksgiving cactus tends to grow more upright, while the Christmas cactus tends to be more pendulous or drooping. Both bloom around the same time period.

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Both species originated in Brazil and grow as epiphytes in plant debris trapped among tree branches or in decaying humus on the ground. An epiphyte is a plant that grows on another plant but is not parasitic, which means it does not harm the other plant. Therefore, plants grown in the home do best in a light, peat-based potting soil. The container should have holes for drainage. Avoid potting in heavy mineral-type soils where over-watering will quickly lead to root rot and plant death.

While the holiday cacti are blooming, keep them away from heat sources such as appliances and furnace vents. Heat causes the flowers to deteriorate faster.

Here are some tips to care for the Thanksgiving or Christmas cactus throughout the year. From January through May, place plants in a sunny location indoors. Water the plants two to four days after the soil appears dry. This plant prefers to be drier than most houseplants but not as dry as other cacti and succulents. Fertilize monthly with a complete houseplant fertilizer.

On June 1, take the plant outdoors to a location that receives about six hours of sunlight daily. If the plant is root-bound in the pot, repot it into another container. The growing media used should be very light and drain well. The plant does not have to be repotted annually.

From June through August, continue to water and fertilize your cactus as in the spring. Since it is in a pot, check it several times a week. Depending on the weather, it may need to be watered more often outside than if the plant was inside the house.

On September 1, begin to reduce the frequency of watering by one-half to reduce potential disease problems. Also, reduce the frequency of fertilizer application to once every six weeks.

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Holiday cacti bloom in response to short days and/or cool temperatures. To cause plants to set flower buds, expose them to nine hours of light and fifteen hours of uninterrupted darkness daily, starting in September. This can be accomplished by placing the plant in a light-free closet or under a box at 6:00 p.m. each evening and returning it to the sunny window at 7:00 a.m. the next morning, from around September 21 to October 31.

Covering the plants can be a hassle. An alternative to covering is to hold temperatures between 50 and 59 degrees F, which stimulates flowering despite day length. This can be done by leaving the plants outdoors during September to October 15. Be sure to protect the plants from frost during this time. When brought indoors in early October, flower buds are set and the plants flower around Thanksgiving.

Plants flower for three to four weeks beginning in mid-November. During November and December you will have a beautiful holiday cactus to enjoy!

Without the flower promotion treatments of short day length or cool temperatures, late, inconsistent flowering with fewer blossoms will be apparent at Christmas.

Unopened flower buds may fall off if temperatures reach above 75 degrees F where the plant is placed in the home. Over-watering plants in heavy soil and/or sudden changes in temperature or light levels may also cause premature flower bud drop.

To start a new holiday cactus plant, remove one or two continuous leaf-like stem segments at what looks like a joint from the tip of the stem. Let it lay on a counter for two to three days to let it harden and dry, otherwise, it may rot in the soil. Then place it in potting soil. Keep it moist but not wet. It may take three weeks or more to root. Plant three rooted cuttings

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together to make a fuller looking pot. When they begin to grow, pinch them back to promote branching.

For more information about Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service Office at 270-685-8480 or [annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu](mailto:annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu).

## **Annette's Tips:**

Enjoy ornamental grasses throughout the winter. The blades glisten in the sun when covered with a frost. They also add sound to the garden as the wind blows through them. In the spring before new growth begins, cut the grasses back to about 4 to 6 inches in height to avoid looking at a mixture of dead and living grass blades all summer.

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