



Sallie Lee
Urban Regional Extension Agent
News Release

Showtime for holiday cactus

Question: I have what is called a Christmas cactus given to me this spring that's got buds all over it and I need to know how to make it bloom in time for the holidays. Do I take it inside (it's been on my shaded porch all summer), water or fertilize it – what do I do?

Answer: We're very fond of our holiday cactuses, whether Thanksgiving or Christmas, as they put on quite a show about the time most other color is gone.

The Thanksgiving cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*) and the Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*) are, as their names suggest, closely related. Care for them is similar, and to many of us it's hard to tell them apart, kind of like fraternal twins. However, for those who want to know why their "Christmas cactus" is blooming in November, the answer might be - because it's a Thanksgiving, not Christmas, cactus.

Although native to the tropical forests of South America, these plants do nicely in sturdy hanging baskets or containers as the plants can grow quite large. They do fine outdoors away from artificial light until nighttime temperatures dip into the 40s. At that point, bring them inside to a cool area as they do best when temps are between 50 and 65 degrees. Once inside, to help initiate blooming, keep them away from light from 5:00pm until 8:00am. Water sparingly, as too much water can cause bud drop and even root rot, so let the top inch of soil become dry to the touch before watering again.

Either *Schlumbergera* is a striking plant in full bloom, and many prefer to enjoy the show rather than fret over the proper name. For those who fall in the other category, the most apparent feature, other than when they bloom is that Thanksgiving, or "crab" cactus, has sharply serrated or "toothed" leaves compared to the rounded leaves of the Christmas cactus. Another way of identifying which you have: if bloom pushes upward, it's a Thanksgiving cactus; Christmas cactuses hang down.

Plant bodies are flattened, and leaves or segments are actually stems. Old-fashioned cactus produced fuchsia-colored blooms, but now we have hybrids that come in white, red, yellow and even purple.

Long-lived (some have been in families over 50 years), these cactuses are easily propagated. You'll need a small container of moist potting soil, a Thanksgiving or Christmas cactus to

provide a cutting or cuttings, and rooting hormone, which is helpful but not necessary. Clip off a 3 or 4 segment piece, dip the cut end in rooting hormone if you have it, then push the cut end into a container of soil about an inch or so. That's the hard part. Make sure the soil stays moist, which can easily be done by propping a transparent plastic bag over the cutting. To make sure the plastic doesn't touch your cactus cutting, insert a popsicle or other small wooden structure in the container about an inch or so deep, and drape the plastic mini green-house over it. Rooted, growing cuttings make great Christmas (or Thanksgiving) gifts to friends and family, gardeners or not.

Cactuses like 50-60% humidity, so if your home in winter is very dry, fill a waterproof saucer with gravel, add water halfway full, and put the cactus (in its pot, please) on the gravel surface.

If flower buds drop off before they become blooms, it is usually due to over-watering, lack of humidity, or insufficient light.

Also note that regardless of which holiday your cactus represents, avoid high temperatures and heat fluctuations when the plant is in flower.

A trouble-free plant that blooms profusely with a minimum of effort? Merry Christmas, or Happy Thanksgiving, either one.

For more information about this topic please contact Sallie Lee, Urban Regional Extension Agent-Home Grounds, Gardens and Home Pests at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email leesall@aces.edu.

Thanksgiving cactus



Christmas cactus

