



# CHRISTMAS CACTUS CARE

Christmas cactus are long lived houseplants, second only to poinsettias in announcing the arrival of the holidays. The blooms are delightful, seeming to glow with a slightly metallic sheen, and it's satisfying to know that the right care will bring your plant into bloom year after year. Due to their longevity, a Christmas cactus can be passed along for generations (many people bring in "Grandma's Christmas Cactus" for repotting advice).

## **Growing Tips**

Christmas cactus are usually purchased in late fall and winter months already in bloom, or at least budded. When taking your Christmas cactus home, avoid extreme temperature changes as this may cause some buds to drop off. For the best results, place in a bright window and keep the soil slightly moist. There is no need to fertilize during the winter bloom period.

After the final blooms are spent, Christmas cactus need as much light as possible and prefer to be kept on the cool side during their rest periods (February-March and July-August). When the flower buds start to show in fall, the plant should be moved to regular room temperature.

These cacti should be repotted every three to five years at the beginning of the growth period. Always use a light soil (commercial cactus soil is fine); it's essential that the soil drain freely.

## **Year 'round Care**

It is important to provide the correct amount of water, food, and rest at the proper periods. Flowering will also depend on the length of daylight hours and the surrounding temperature.

### **February-March (resting period)**

When flowering is over, the plant needs to rest. Water it sparingly, without letting the stems shrink. If possible, move the plant to a cool, bright location.

### **April-June (growing period)**

Start to water more from the beginning of April. The winter period is over, and the cactus will start to grow again. New shoots will be clearly visible at the tip of each stem. Pot in April if needed, and then feed a couple of times over the next months. Use a standard cactus soil through which the water can easily drain. The roots are weak and will rot if the soil is too wet.

Once the weather warms, Christmas cactus can be placed outdoors in a bright area. Avoid direct sunlight which can sunburn the stems of some varieties. Bright dappled shade is ideal.

If you want to take cuttings this is the best time of the year to do it. Propagation can be done easily by placing healthy stems with two to four segments in moist sand.

### **July-August (resting period)**

Reduce watering, allowing soil to dry thoroughly between watering without allowing it to shrivel.

### **September-October (budding period)**

If you've put your cactus outdoors for summer, you can leave it out until the nights drop below 50 degrees (this period of cool nights and shortening days will encourage lots of flower buds.) As soon as there is any sight of flower buds, start to increase watering again. The cactus must never lack water or be moved around too much while producing flowers; otherwise the buds can simply drop off the plant.

You should begin to see tiny, spherical buds forming at the tips in mid-fall. An old, large plant may benefit from a few fertilizer applications in September-October when buds are forming.

### **November-December (blooming period)**

Enjoy your cactus for the holidays!

Try a Christmas Cactus this year! The plant you buy now may become tomorrow's heirloom!

### **Common Problems**

Problem: The cactus starts to shrivel in its rest period.

Diagnosis: It needs more water. Give it a good soak in a bowl of water or the sink, and then let it drain well after about half an hour.

Problem: Crown rot.

Diagnosis: This is a sign that the roots are rotting. The plant has either been over-watered or the soil mixture is wrong. The plant cannot survive for much longer, so take healthy cuttings and get new plants started.

Problem: The buds fall off.

Diagnosis: The plant has been moved too much or has had too little water during the time it sets its buds. Give it a little more TLC and see what happens. You may simply need to wait for the next bloom cycle to watch it display its beauty.