

CHRISTMAS CACTUSES AT HOME

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Flowering cactuses as house plants are sold by many florists and retail outlets. They are usually sold as Christmas Cactus in bloom but often, if they survive, flower later the following year.

Technically there are two types of flowering cactus: the Christmas Cactus and the Easter Cactus. The Christmas Cactus usually flowers from Thanksgiving to Christmas. Its leaves have pointed lobes and its botanical name is Zygocactus truncatus.



The Easter Cactus, Schlumbergera bridgessii, has wider leaves which are rounded. It usually flowers from Christmas to Easter.

No matter which plant you have or purchase, the culture in the home is similar.

These plants prefer a well-drained soil (3 parts compost, 1 part peat moss, and 2 parts sand). An occasional light application of a complete fertilizer is beneficial.

Bud initiation normally takes place during early fall when the days become shorter and temperature lower. To set flower buds, one of the following conditions must be met:

1. At 50-55°F night temperature, flower buds will form regardless of day length.
2. At 60-65°F night temperature, supply 13 uninterrupted, complete hours of darkness (such as an unused room). To put it another way, protect plants from electric lights from September to November.
3. Flower buds seldom form at night temperatures above 70°F.
4. After flower buds are well developed, they will flower at normal house temperature.

Depending on the hours of light and temperature the plant receives, the Christmas Cactus should bloom during late fall or early winter. The flower buds of the Easter Cactus will develop more slowly and bloom about mid-winter.

After flowering, the plant will produce new growth. It is on this growth that flower buds appear the following year. During this period of active growth, more fertilizer and water should be provided. About mid-August, water may be reduced to harden off the new growth.

Withholding water slows down the plant's metabolism so that carbohydrates are stored within the plant rather than being used for new growth. From this time until flowering, the plant should be watered only as needed.

These plants are easily propagated from leaf cuttings at any time of the year.

Problems

Insect or disease problems are rare.

Causes of flower bud drop are as follows:

1. Too much water.
2. Too little water
3. Changing the environment radically, such as from the greenhouse to the home.