

Holiday Cacti

By B.J. May, Master Gardener



Holiday cacti that bloom in our homes in the dark of winter are hybrids from the genus *Schlumbergera truncata* and *Schlumbergera russelliana*. They originated as forest cacti in the mountains of Brazil, but the first hybrids of our modern cacti were initially bred in England about 150 years ago. Today they come in several different colors although the most common is that deep lipstick pink that brightens our homes during the holidays. Some cacti bloom at Thanksgiving, some at Christmas and some may bloom as late as Easter. While they are called cacti, they are not true cacti but rather a tropical plant that prefer a tropical type environment rather than a desert environment. But now the holidays are over; what should we do to insure our plant will bloom again next year.

Blooming is hard work, so after the plant blooms, it needs to rest for 4 weeks or so. It needs very little water, no food and a cool place with diffuse light. It is not a good idea to place these plants near doors that open to the outside, or close to heating vents or fireplaces. They prefer cooler climates. This is also not the time to trim an overlarge plant.

When new buds begin to appear, usually in March or April, the plant needs to be near a good but diffuse light source. Once a month feeding helps the plant develop new growth but be careful of overwatering. The plant needs water when the top inch or so of soil is completely dry. Water until water runs out the drainage hole in your pot but do not let the plant sit in water. Watering time is also a good time to feed the plant. An all purpose houseplant fertilizer with low nitrogen. Holiday cacti like a somewhat humid environment. If you are in a particularly dry place, try putting the pot in a saucer with gravel and water. Make sure the bottom of the pot is not in the water. Placing a glass of water near the plant will also help increase humidity. Some people place their plants outside during the spring and summer months but that is not necessary. Many holiday cacti do very well in the house in a bright but diffuse light environment. Others thrive in screened in porches where they receive good light but no direct sun. Wherever you put your Holiday cactus, make sure it gets only diffuse light as it does not like direct sunlight.

Mid to late October is the time to start encouraging blooms.. To encourage blooms, the plant needs 10-14 hours of darkness, and a cool environment, around 50-55 degrees. In October or November, feed it once with a 0-10-10 fertilizer to encourage bloom setting. One of the problems that can occur with these cacti is bud drop. This is usually caused by overwatering. Overwatering can also lead to root rot and breakage at the soil line.

A new cactus can be propagated any time except when buds are setting by breaking off a leaf at the junction and planting it. A good potting soil mixture or orchid plant mix works well for this plant. They do not mind crowing or being pot bound and, over the years, a large plant has been known to grow well in a relatively small pot.

For further information go to <http://ucce.ucdavis.edu/> and search on holiday cactus or see <http://www.humeseeds.com/xmasccts.htm>. For further information on any of your gardening needs contact the Alameda County Master Gardeners at:925-960-9420 or 510-639-1371, or check our website at <http://www.acmg.ucdavis.edu/>.