

Christmas Cactus Care

This plant has several names and several cousins: Christmas Cactus, Thanksgiving Cactus, Crab's Claw Cactus, Claw Cactus, Yoke Cactus, Linkleaf Cactus, Schlumbergera Zygocactus, Zygocactus Truncates, or Schlumbergera Bridgesii. They are all commonly grown houseplants featuring bright green arched branches with a drooping habit, especially when in bloom, with usually salmon (but also white, red and orange) colored blooms.

They are native to the jungles of South America where they grow on trees which is known as "epiphytic". Although Christmas Cactus belongs to the cactus family, it should not be cared for the same way as its thorned relatives. As potted plants, they require a rich, porous soil such as African violet soil mix or 1 part potting soil, 2 parts leaf mold and 1 part perlite. The potted plant's soil should be kept moist (but not wet) and fertilized weekly at one-half of the recommended strength when in bloom. They should be placed in a cool, bright (but not direct sunlight) location. Western or Northern exposure is best.

In the summer, put them outside in partial shade so as to ripen the stems. To obtain the glorious blooms in December and January, withhold water in the month of October, then resume watering in November, but don't let the stems get "flabby" from overwatering.

From October on, keep the plant cool at night in a 55 - 65 degree range. Some will recommend putting the plant in a dark, cool closet for five weeks, which will bring flowers in 10 - 12 weeks from start. Budding results from "short days" of light in October and November or provide it with a cold shock. Once the buds are set, try to keep the plant at 70 - 75 degree days and 60 - 70 degree nights. These plants should be repotted very infrequently. Check occasionally for mealybugs, scale insects and aphids.

A couple of key points will keep your plant beautiful. First, do not overwater and carefully watch your plant adapt. And, when it starts to bud, fertilize it until blooming ceases.