

## **Post-Christmas Cactus Care**

The Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera x buckleyi*) is a cherished houseplant known for its vibrant blooms during the holiday season. Native to the rainforests of Brazil, this epiphytic cactus thrives in conditions that mimic its natural habitat. Proper post-bloom care is essential to ensure its health and encourage future flowering.

### **Immediate Post-Bloom Care**

Removing any spent flowers is beneficial after the Christmas cactus has finished blooming. This practice prevents the plant from expending energy on seed production and maintains its appearance. Gently twist or pinch off the wilted blooms at the base to avoid damaging the stems.

### **Adjusting Watering Practices**

Following the blooming period, the Christmas cactus enters a brief rest phase. During this time, reduce watering to allow the top inch of soil to dry out between waterings. Overwatering can lead to root rot, so it is crucial to ensure that the plant is not left sitting in water. As new growth appears in spring, gradually increase watering to keep the soil evenly moist, but not waterlogged.

### **Light and Temperature Requirements**

Place the Christmas cactus in a location with bright, indirect light. Direct sunlight can scorch the leaves, while insufficient light may hinder growth. An east-facing window is ideal, providing gentle morning sun. Maintain indoor temperatures between 60°F and 70°F (15°C to 21°C) during the day and slightly cooler at night. Avoid exposing the plant to drafts or sudden temperature fluctuations, which can cause stress and potential bud drop.

### **Fertilization Schedule**

As new growth emerges, fertilizing the Christmas cactus in late winter or early spring. Use a balanced, water-soluble fertilizer diluted to half-strength every four weeks. Continue this regimen through late summer. Switch to a low-nitrogen fertilizer in the fall to promote bud formation for the next

blooming cycle. Cease fertilization once buds appear to prevent them from dropping.

### **Pruning for Health and Shape**

Pruning the Christmas cactus after its blooming period helps maintain a compact shape and encourages branching, leading to more abundant future blooms. To prune, twist, or cut off a few segments from the ends of the stems. This can be done by hand or with sterilized pruning shears. The removed segments can be used for propagation.

### **Propagation Techniques**

Propagating the Christmas cactus is relatively straightforward. After pruning, allow the cut segments to callous over for a day or two. Then, plant them in a well-draining soil mix, such as a combination of potting soil and perlite. Keep the soil lightly moist and place the cuttings in bright, indirect light. Within a few weeks, roots should develop, and new growth will follow.

### **Repotting Considerations**

Repotting is typically necessary every two to three years or when the plant becomes root bound. The best time to repot is during the active growth phase in the spring. Choose a container with drainage holes and use a well-draining soil mix. Gently remove the plant from its current pot, shake off excess soil, and place it in the new container, filling in around the roots with fresh soil. After repotting, water the plant thoroughly and resume regular care.

### **Encouraging Future Blooms**

To promote blooming for the next holiday season, environmental cues are essential. In the fall, give the Christmas cactus 12 to 14 hours of uninterrupted darkness each night for about six weeks. This can be achieved by placing the plant in a dark room or covering it with a box in the evening. Additionally, maintain cooler temperatures around 50°F to 55°F (10°C to 13°C) during this period. Once buds form, return the plant to its usual location and care routine.

## **Common Issues and Solutions**

- **Bud Drop:** Often caused by overwatering, low humidity, or sudden changes in temperature or light. Ensure consistent care and avoid moving the plant once buds have set.
- **Yellowing Leaves:** May indicate overwatering or poor drainage. Check the soil moisture and adjust watering practices accordingly.
- **Pest Infestations:** While relatively resistant, Christmas cacti can occasionally attract pests like mealybugs or spider mites. Treat infestations promptly with insecticidal soap or by wiping the leaves with a mixture of water and mild dish soap.

By following these post-bloom care guidelines, your Christmas cactus can thrive and provide beautiful displays for many holiday seasons to come.

## **References**

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