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Holiday Cacti

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Almost everyone is familiar with the Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter cacti that bloom from late fall through spring, providing cheerful color at a time of year when few other houseplants look their best. They bear exquisite blossoms in white (often edged with pink or rose), shades of red, pink, purple, orange, salmon, and even yellow. It's no wonder that these plants are popular, enduring favorites.

Although Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti are similar in appearance, they are actually different species. Countless hybrids and named cultivars are available, providing a dazzling array of colors from plants that bloom throughout the winter months and at the same time creating considerable confusion about each plant's true identity. *Schlumbergia truncata* (also known as the Crab Claw Cactus) tends to bloom earlier, around Thanksgiving. Its flat segments are prominently toothed, often with two large teeth at the tip of the last joint on each branch. Plants that bloom closer to Christmas are likely to be *Schlumbergia* × *buckleyi*, characterized by smoother, scallop-edged segments on somewhat drooping branches.

The Easter Cactus, *Hatiora gaertneri* (frequently sold as *Rhipsalidopsis gaertneri*), blooms in spring and in many cases rewards its owner with a second floral display in the fall. Its segments are rounded and may be flat or 3- to 5-angled, with small golden bristles at the ends. Many varieties are available, most bearing flowers in shades of pink or red.

In their native South American habitat, the holiday cacti grow in tropical jungles at altitudes of 3000 to 5000 feet. They are *epiphytes*, growing on objects or other plants and obtaining their water and nutrients from the humid air around them rather than from the soil. Growing in the understory, they root in plant debris among the branches of trees or on the ground in stony, shady places. In the home, these cacti require bright but filtered light, making them ideal plants for sheltered patios or spaces inside the house near south-facing windows. In their native habitat, they may receive as much as 17 inches of rain a month during the summer growing season. Rainfall drops dramatically to as little as 3 inches per month in the dry season, but that is still enough to provide sufficient constant moisture and humidity.

Holiday cacti do best in a temperatures ranging from 50° to 70°F (10° to 21.1°C). They may drop their flower buds in hot, dry weather, and will freeze if temperatures fall below 32°F (0°C). The potting mix should be loose and fast-draining (for example, 40% perlite and 60% peat moss) and somewhat acidic (pH 5.0 to 6.0), and should be allowed to dry out partially (but not completely) between waterings so that air can circulate around the roots. To increase humidity, you can place the plants on a tray containing pebbles and water or you can lightly mist them during dry weather. Pests and diseases are not often a worry in healthy holiday cacti if you follow sound cultural practices.

Fertilize *Schlumbergia* cacti every two to four weeks during the growing season (March to September) using a dilute solution of a well-balanced formulation such as 10-10-5. Easter cacti (*Hatiora*) can be fertilized all year except during the bloom period. Liquid fertilizers are easy to use, but granular and slow-release formulations are equally effective.



To induce bloom for late-December holidays, provide *Schlumbergia* species with cool nighttime temperatures (50° to 55°F [10° to 12.8°C]) and 12 to 14 hours of darkness starting in mid September, and at the same time reduce watering to compensate for slowed growth. This is fairly easy to achieve if you keep the plants in a spare bedroom or other little-used area of the house where the lights are not turned on at night. When the flower buds appear, gradually increase watering and provide temperatures of 60° to 65°F (15.6° to 18.3°C) at night. While the plants are in bloom, you can move them to a location where the blossoms can be enjoyed, but avoid placing them in drafty spots or near heater or air conditioner vents. After blooming, the plants will benefit from a rest period of 6 to 8 weeks, during which time they should be kept cool (55°F [12.8°C]) and watered sparingly until new spring growth appears. Then resume a regular watering and fertilization schedule.

Holiday cacti are easy to propagate from cuttings, which should be taken during the warm days of late spring and early summer. Allow the cut ends of the stems to dry (*callus*) for a few days and then insert the cut ends about 1 inch deep into moist, clean potting mix. The use of a rooting hormone is not generally necessary. In areas with low humidity, you may be able to root the cuttings more readily if you cover them with a clear plastic bag or other translucent material that will help retain moisture in the rooting medium. The covering should be supported to keep it from coming into direct contact with the cuttings.

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California Master Gardener Handbook, publication 3382

Plants Indoors: Selections for Various Environmental Conditions, publication 2898

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