

Holiday Cacti

“Holiday” cacti Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas, are native to Brazil. In the wild, these species grow as epiphytes (like orchids and bromeliads) on the exterior of tree branches and rock surfaces in shady, humid rain forests. In natural environments, they get nutrients and water from rain, air, etc. Like most cacti, these plants lack true leaves and conduct photosynthesis in their green stems which are similar, but less spiny than pads of prickly pear or joints of cholla.

For most people in the U.S., these plants are grown indoors. They are quite easy to care for once you understand the basics. When not in flower, grow the plant as you would any houseplant. They can be kept in a shady location outdoors during the summer but must be moved indoors before temperatures drop below 45 degrees F.

Easter cactus (*Schlumbergera gaertneri* also called *Hatiora gaertneri*) is considered a long day plant and sets buds in late winter or early spring when days become longer. They are spring blooming, come from higher elevations, and are considered a little more difficult to grow than the fall blooming species of Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti. Easter cactus flowers are a deep scarlet and have stamens that are arranged uniformly.

Thanksgiving cactus is most easily recognized by pointed/toothed stem segments, flowers held more or less horizontally with the upper and lower sides are not symmetrical (zygomorphic), and pollen which is yellow. Flower are mostly pastels, variations of red, pink, peach, purple orange or white.

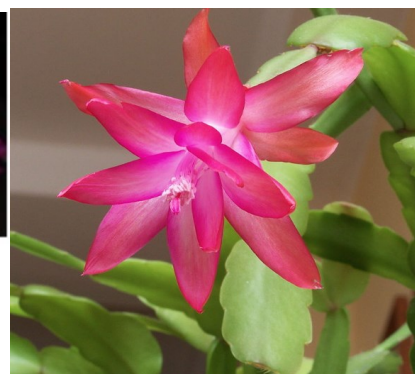
Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera x bridgesii*) and Thanksgiving cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*) are close relatives of Easter cactus but bloom in fall and winter. The Christmas cactus has stem segments with rounded, more symmetrical teeth, more or less symmetrical flowers which hang downward, and pollen which is pink. They are available in a wide variety of colors including red, yellow, purple, pink or white. They generally flower later than the Thanksgiving cactus and are not commonly available.



Easter cactus (Photo by Jeff Schalau, University of Arizona).



Thanksgiving cactus (Photo by Mary Barnes).



Christmas cactus (University of Missouri Extension).

Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti bloom when nights are at least 15 hours long. All of these species flower more if exposed to prolonged cool temperatures between 50-55°F. Fewer flowers will form at night temperatures above 70 degrees. When plants begin to flower, they should be kept in bright, indirect light. Too much light can cause the flower color to fade or the heat may cause the flower buds to drop. Daytime temperatures of 70°F and evening temperatures of 60-65°F are considered ideal.

Some references indicate these cacti bloom more profusely when kept somewhat pot bound. Repotting is necessary only about once every three years and is best done after the bloom period. The potting medium must be well-drained with good aeration, as these epiphytic cacti do not grow well in heavy, wet potting mixes. A good mix may contain 60-80% potting soil with 40-20% added perlite. Fertilize monthly between April and October with a complete houseplant fertilizer.

Holiday cacti are easy to propagate by cuttings. During the June pruning, save stems with 3 to 5 segments and allow the cut ends of the sections to callus by placing them in a dry, shady location for a few days. Using the mix described above, place three cuttings at approximately one inch deep into the potting soil of a 4-inch container. Water the soil well, and cover the plants and rooting container with a clear plastic bag (thin grocery produce bags work well). Secure the bag with a rubber band around the container. The plastic bag will act as a miniature greenhouse to keep the relative humidity at 100% to enhance rooting. Place the container in bright, indirect light until roots have formed in three to eight weeks. Then, remove the plastic bag and share them with friends and family.

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Adapted from original Backyard Gardener publications by Jeff Schalau, Agent, Agriculture & Natural Resources, University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, Yavapai County

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