Holiday Mixup: Christmas, Thanksgiving and/or Easter Cactus?

by Nora Graf

Before we start a note on taxonomy: the names of these cacti have changed, are changing and may be changed again, so don’t be surprised if you see many names on plants in stores and nurseries. Names you might see are: Schlumbergera, Zygo-cactus, Epiphyllum, Cereus or Cactus. Also what is called Christmas cactus may actually be a hybrid between the Christmas (S. bridgesii) and the Thanksgiving (S. russelliana) cactus. Both are native to a region north of Rio de Janeiro.

One of the plants you may receive as a gift or decide to buy over the holiday season is the “Christmas Cactus”, Schlumbergera bridgesii or S. russelliana. There is often confusion about the name. It can appear under a variety of names in nurseries. This is a true cactus, native to the tropical jungles of South America where it grows on trees (epiphytes). It can be confused with the Thanksgiving Cactus, Zygocactus (or Schlumbergera) truncates. It differs in having elongated blooms and claw-shaped joints and is easier to make bloom. Both of these may bloom twice a year (Between March and May). Then there is the Easter Cactus, Rhipsalidopsis gaertneri. This cactus is less sensitive to site change and has brilliant red flowers that bloom in March or April.

Bloom colors of the Christmas cactus have expanded over the last few years and it is available in a variety of shades of red, pink and apricot. With some simple care and feeding needs this cactus should reward you with a profusion of blooms for many years.

Most likely you’ll get one of these plants while it is blooming. After blooming the plant needs a rest period. During the rest period don’t water it very often. Keep it slightly moist, allowing it to dry between watering. It likes a sunny window until new growth starts to form.

Once there is new growth, start to feed the plant and increase the water. During the summer give it partial shade in an eastern to southern exposure inside. If outside, place it in a location that has good light but avoids the direct sun. Mist once or twice a day, as the plant likes a higher humidity. Pot in a rich acidic, well draining soil.
Avoid excessive fertilization. A soluble fertilizer can be used monthly but reduce to a quarter what the directions recommend.

These plants like slightly acidic conditions and if you are using a good potting mix that shouldn’t be a problem unless you are watering with water that is alkaline. If you are having problems with growing one and everything seems to be by the book, check the pH on your water. A little vinegar, can be added to shift it to the more acid side. One thing I read is that if you are a tea drinker; use any leftover tea to water the plants with.

If the stems start to drop off, cut back on the water as you are likely drowning it. Just add water when the top few inches of the soil are dry. Once the whole plant is shriveled, throw it away as there isn’t much hope unless you can find a few healthy roots. If the roots are white and still pliable, repot it and try again. If the roots are brown and mushy, try a new plant.

This is a plant that likes to be pot-bound and does not like being disturbed. Resist the impulse to top dress the soil or repot it frequently. Do not repot annually, every two to three years is soon enough. It will drop its flower buds if disturbed during the blooming cycle.

To encourage blooming at the end of its dormancy period the plant needs cooler temperatures of 55°F to 65°F for four to six weeks with ten hours of light and fourteen hours of darkness—not even light from a light bulb! Start this regime in September to have it bloom for the holiday season.

Leaf propagation is an easy way to expand your collection. Simply take a single joint (leaf) off of the plant and pot it up. It will grow new roots and soon you will have more plants.

It is mostly insect and disease free.

FYI: The Easter Cactus can be more difficult to grow as it will start to lose its stem segments at the slightest provocation: improper watering, drafts, etc. or simply refuse to bloom.

Thank You!

I would just like to thank all the people that helped me this year. My extreme gratitude goes to Marilyn Perkins and Paul Diemer for their long time effort to keep me on the path of good grammar, punctuation and spelling. Be assured if it weren’t for them the newsletter would be filled with mistakes.

Thanks to Mary Barnes for providing me with current information and finding the mistakes I seem to frequently make about times, locations, programing and a few other things.

The Cooperative Extension staff including Jeff, Karen, Pam and Lisa are always available to answer my questions and get the newsletters posted.

Thanks to all of you who have written articles or sent me interesting tidbits. I try to use them all at some point. If I have forgotten something please forgive me. I will try to do better next year.
The go-to cure for many insect problems in organic gardens is still a pesticide that kills good and bad insects. Before you rush out and buy it next year you need to understand its benefits and limitations.

Bt is a soil-dwelling bacterium. It was first discovered by a Japanese biologist in 1902 and apparently no one noticed, as it was "rediscovered" by a German scientist in 1911. He figured out it caused a disease in moth caterpillars. Just as a note of curiosity, Bt is closely related to the bacterium that causes anthrax. (Please don’t get excited and panic!) Scientists were able to figure out the toxic mechanism and created insecticides in the 1920’s but they weren’t generally available until the 1950’s.

Today you can find Bt for home pesticide use. It appears under a variety of names. Different strains affect different insects. The beauty of this is that you can target a specific problem versus spraying a broad-spectrum insecticide. Bt is sprayed on the plants and the insect larvae feed on the Bt and are killed. (The insect must eat it for it to be effective so for some insects that bore into stems or fruit, like corn borers, it is not very effective.) The Bt reacts with the lining of the gut of caterpillars. It paralyzes the digestive system and the insect stops eating and starves to death. The advantages include being able to spray high concentrations and only the targeted pests are affected so only the pest feeding on the plant is killed.

Bt is considered safe for both the farmers and consumers and is one of the few controls organic farmers are allowed to use. The effects of Bt don’t last long; it will degrade in light and most formulas last less than a week; some even degrade within 24 hours.

One of the concerns about Bt has always been its impact on species that people like. A caterpillar is a butterfly or moth that most people want in their yard. You can’t have butterflies or moths without caterpillars, though.

Human ingenuity has changed the equation of Bt’s usefulness in recent years, along with larger wholesale use. Through gene-splicing, Bt has been incorporated into the genes of some plants. What that means is that plants growing with the Bt gene don’t need to be sprayed; the Bt is already incorporated into the plant. The downside of this is that Bt is beginning to loose its effectiveness as a pesticide as insects adapt to presence of Bt. Bt resistance in the pink bollworm has already been found in cotton. Diamondback moths are beginning to acquire resistance to Bt also. This does not bode well for home gardeners, as Bt has been an effective control for many caterpillars that harm vegetable plants.

Bt genes in plants have moved out of managed plant populations and been found in related plants that were not created in the laboratory. While the study of Bt mobility in corn has been hotly contested, it has been found that genes in agriculture plants can be transferred to closely related wild plants. This has important social, economic and health ramifications for farmers, consumers and business.

As I’ve said before read the directions carefully and consider what you are doing.

Bt advantages
- It targets specific types of insects (Besides caterpillars, there are several other types available including one that kills mosquito larvae and another kills fungus gnats.)
- Non-toxic to non-target species—safe for pets and humans.
- Doesn’t linger in the environment.

Bt disadvantages
- It’s slow acting; it might take several days to kill.
- Don’t get impatient and spray again! It is not a contact poison, the insect needs to eat it.
- It may kill insects you want to keep.
- It degrades very quickly.
New Plants for Spring 2011
by Nora Graf

Nurseries are always trying to come up with the newest, greatest, easy-grow plant that takes no water—to attract our attention. Don’t always believe that part about no water and maybe easy-grow but “new” might be true. Anyway, these are some of the plants that might be available for next year that come close to the new, the greatest………

From High Country Gardens:

Kniphofia Red Nancy or Nancy’s Red Torch Lily. Since kniphofia will actually grow in my yard, I am attracted to this one. Bright red torches tops the stems. A nice break from the usual reddish-orange/yellows.

Agastache “Blue Blazes” has “clouds of gorgeous lavender-purple flower spikes.” It is supposed to be large and vigorous and blooms for an extended period mid-summer to mid-fall. Hummingbirds like it.

Bouteloua “Blond Ambition” is supposed to be unique. It has chartreuse flowers. Stems are 2 to 3 feet and the seed heads mature to blonde. Good for winter interest.

Penstemon pseudospectabilis ‘Coconino County’. This is a close-to-home plant (for those of you who don’t know, Coconino County is our neighboring county to the north). The description says it will bloom for a month with hundreds of flowers.

From Terra Nova Nurseries

Coreopsis ‘Pineapple Pie’. Coreopsis is one of the flowers that seem to be a favorite for experimenting with. They are great for our climate. Pineapple Pie is a mounding plant that flowers all summer long into the fall. Works in containers or borders. Supposedly it doesn’t reseed. I’m not sure if that’s a plus or minus but it is a pretty flower.

From Monrovia nursery

Blue Balloon® Bluebeard Caryopteris x clandonensis ‘Korball’ Blue Balloon® Zone 6 – 9
This spherical plant looks like (according to Monrovia’s description) a “blue balloon when in full bloom.” It has deep blue flowers and will bloom from August through September. Butterflies and bees like it. The leaves have silvery hairs on the bottom, lavender fragrance. Deciduous broadleaf shrub.

Angel Red® Pomegranate Zone 7 - 11
This Pomegranate has bright red fruit that ripens earlier than other varieties. The seeds are soft and can be eaten along with the pulp. Reaches 15 feet tall. Requires 200 chilling hours.

From Proven Winners

Superbena(R) Royale Chambray
This plant has purple-blue blooms that butterflies like. It’s a low-maintenance, heat-tolerant annual 6 to 10 inches tall that blooms from late spring until the first frost.

GoldDust(TM) Mecardonia grows 2 to 5 inches tall and has sulfur yellow blooms from May through October. It is heat tolerant and has a non-stop bloom. It spreads slowly.

New David Austin Roses

Lady Shalott (apricot)

Tam O’Shanter (deep-cerise)

Susan Williams-Ellis (white)
The Wedgewood Rose (rose-pink)
Kew Gardens (white single)
AARS Roses

Walking on Sunshine

Dick Clark

From Ball Horticultural

Petunia 'Black Velvet'. The claim reads, “the world’s only black petunia.” We’ll see if it’s really black but if you like petunias this could be a great flower to combine with brighter flowers.

Coneflowers continue to evolve and several new varieties are coming out. My complaint is that these Echinacea’s are starting to look more like chrysanthemums. The color range is really expanding also. In fact, that is a minor gripe with new introductions. Many really look like older varieties. How many really different red roses are there that you would want a new one every year? Sometimes in their drive to make things different they really make it look like something else. If I wanted a coneflower that looked like a chrysanthemum, I’d buy a chrysanthemums. The more things change the more they stay the same. Anyway, it seems to be a human need to seek out the new, so explore and see what treasures you can find for your garden next year.

Gardening Gifts

by Nora Graf

Do you have a gardening friend that you would like to give a gift to, but you want to make it personal? You aren't much of an artist you say so you can't do anything homemade. Well think again. Even the most inartistic person can make these. Gardeners love pots and plants but we get tired of the same old thing. So here is are a couple of things anyone can create that are simple, cheap if need be and take very little time.

Terra cotta Pots

Every gardener has a few. That rustic red clay is beautiful but can be repetitive. Buy a pot or two and paint it. How about a bright blue, even purple. How about chartreuse!

Start with a new pot to make this easy. Use a water or oil based polyurethane to seal the inside. Paint 2 to 3 coats to completely seal it. Terra cotta pots are porous so any water will move through and eventually pop off anything you paint on the outside.

Use a light color (white, beige, light gray) as the first coat. This is so the color you choose will be true and you will need fewer coats to hide the red clay color. The second coat can be the color of choice. The brand “Patio Paints” is available at most craft stores and comes in a variety of colors in small quantities but any decent acrylic paint will work.

You can create personal designs by using masking tape to create strips or paint on messages or any sort of simple figure like a heart, a bow, etc.

Once the paint has dried thoroughly, apply a waterproof polyurethane seal on the outside. Terra cotta is fired at lower temperatures, it is quite porous. It continually wicks water from the soil which causes your painted finish to peel. As I mentioned, painting the inside of the pot is an important step. Make sure to do it!

Following these simple steps will really insure a nice, long-lasting finish on all your garden pottery for years to come.
Landslide Vote Highlights November MGA Meeting

The final vote wasn’t even close. No intrigue, no calls for a recount, not even a write-in candidate. Unlike the recent national election, voter turn out was high, nearly 50%. At the end of the evening, the Yavapai County Master Gardener Association had elected the 2011 officers by acclamation. Our new officers are: Eric Downing ’09, President; Ron Zmyslinski ’08, President Elec, Bev Turnbull ’02 Treasurer, Kris Holt ’09 Secretary.

Current President, Bob Burke, gave a brief history of the Association, roughly dating back to 2000 with 49 members. Today, active membership is about 130.

Jeff Schalau moused his way through the new UA Website, http://extension.arizona.edu/yavapai, showing the ins and outs of navigating from the UA Extension home page to the local Yavapai home page. Jeff acknowledged the talented assistance of Mary Barnes on the project.

Painted Pails, Cans or Watering cans

Another quick easy project is to take large metal cans, buckets or watering cans and create personal gifts. If you want to use them for plants, make sure you put holes in the bottom for drainage. (Don’t do this to the watering can if you want to use it for water!) Just find a paint that works on metal. Many spray paints are good on metal, are simple to use and come in a wide variety of colors. Once you have sprayed the color on, finish it with waterproof polyurethane and it’s done.

Go to the garden center and find a few interesting plants to put in your containers and you have a wonderful personal gift for a friend.

MG News
FROM THE EDITOR: Please send or email articles and announcements to the address below. All articles must be in my hands by the 10th of the month. Short announcements (no more than 2 or 3 lines) will be accepted until the 25th.

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Pecan and Wine Festival
The Camp Verde Pecan and Wine Festival will be held on Feb 11th to Feb 13th. If you’d like to help with the pecan judging on Feb 11th, please contact Nora Graf, mesquite2@hotmail.com We will also have a Master Gardener information table at that event. If you can chair the staffing of that table please contact Mary Barnes, mcbarn1@cableone.net.

Just a reminder there will be no newsletter in January. The next newsletter will be available February 1, 2011. I hope everyone has a wonderful December.

Yavapai Gardens Subscriptions
If you’d like to receive Yavapai Gardens via U.S. Mail in 2011 please have your check to Karen Pizzuto in the Prescott Ext Ofc by January 21, 2011. The price is same as this year, $21.00 for 11 issues. Make the check out to U of A.
Next Meeting

Prescott, January 19, 6:30pm
Speaker: Jeff Barter of Jeffs Landscaping and Design.
Topic: Landscape Design for Living.

The Cottonwood meeting site has changed. Starting in February (Feb 16) the meeting will be held at the Superior Court Building, 3503 W. SR 260, Camp Verde. I will include a map in the February newsletter.