
CACTUS and SUCCULENT SOCIETY of NEW MEXICO

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CHRISTMAS CACTUS (SCHLUMBERGERA SPP.)

This is a popular flowering house plant, and although a member of the cactus family, is native to jungles rather than to deserts. Several species formerly were listed under *Epiphyllanthus* or *Zygocactus* – its common name is derived from its blooming season. It is an epiphyte that is native to the Rio de Janeiro mountains in Brazil and found at altitudes of 1,300 to 6,550 feet above sea level.

The Christmas cactus grows like a bush with individual stem joints 1 to 2 inches long, forming arching, pendulous branches from whose tips hang satiny, many-petaled flowers. The Easter cactus (*Rhipsalidopsis gaertneri*) bears starlike 1 ½- inch blossoms at the stem joints as well as at the stem ends. The Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*) has clawlike stem joints and bears 3-inch-long hooded tubular pink, reddish, white or multicolored flowers. Hybrids of these two species have no claws; their flowers, also tubular but without hoods, come in lavender or purple as well as pink, red, yellow and white and may appear from December through February.

These cacti do best in bright indirect or curtain-filtered sunlight; they can be grown outdoors during summer in cool shaded areas. Soil should be kept warm and moist. Potting medium should be slightly acidic soil rich in nutrients. (One soil mixture recommendation is 2 parts peat moss, 1 part packaged potting soil, and 1 part sharp sand or perlite.) Fertilize every two weeks during growing season. Keep dry and do not fertilize during dormant period – for approximately four weeks after blooming. Nighttime temperatures should be between 50 and 65 degrees and daytime temperatures of 70 degrees or higher is ideal.

Propagate from seeds or from stem cuttings taken at any time except when the buds are setting.

Christmas cactus insect pests and diseases are generally those suffered by most household plants. The most common insects are mealybugs and spider mites which can generally be removed through washing, and an appropriate pesticide if persistent. Diseases are generally the result of poor cultural practices such as overwatering. Some plants may be salvaged by correcting the cause, or cutting back and restarting. If the plant is too damaged, it may be wise to get rid of it and obtain a new disease-free one. If plants are placed outside in the summer, they should be thoroughly washed with soap and water followed by a clear water rinse before returning them to an inside environment. The soil should also be checked for insects.