
Caring for Your Christmas Cactus

Two types of flowering cacti are sold as houseplants by many florists and retail outlets, the Christmas Cactus and the Easter Cactus. The Christmas Cactus, *Zygocactus truncatus*, features leaves with pointed lobes and usually flowers between Thanksgiving and Christmas. The Easter Cactus, *Schlumbergera bridgessii*, has wider, rounded leaves and typically flowers between Christmas and Easter.

Both species prefer a well-drained soil (use good quality potting soil or a homemade mixture of 3 parts compost, 1 part peat moss, and 2 parts sand) and an occasional light application of a complete fertilizer.

Bud initiation normally takes place during early fall as the days become shorter and temperatures drop. Flower buds seldom form if night temperatures remain above 70°F., but after buds have formed, plants will flower at normal indoor temperatures.

Flower buds will form when nighttime temperatures fall to between 50°-55°F, regardless of day length. At 60°-65°F night temperature, flower buds will form if plants are provided with 13 uninterrupted hours of darkness each day from September until November.

Depending on the hours of light and temperature the plant receives, the Christmas Cactus should bloom during late fall or early winter. The flower buds of the Easter Cactus will develop more slowly and will bloom in mid-winter.

After flowering, the plant will produce new growth. Flower buds will appear on this new growth the following year. During this period of active growth, provide more fertilizer and water. Then, about mid-August reduce water to harden off the new growth. Withholding water slows down the plant's metabolism, so that carbohydrates are stored within the plant, rather than being used for new growth. Until the cactus flowers, water the plant only after the top inch or so of soil becomes dry.

Insects or disease problems rarely bother flowering cacti. Flower buds will drop in response to too much or too little water, or to a radical environmental change, such as moving plants from the greenhouse to the home. Both Christmas and Easter cactus are easily propagated from leaf cuttings at any time of the year.

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