

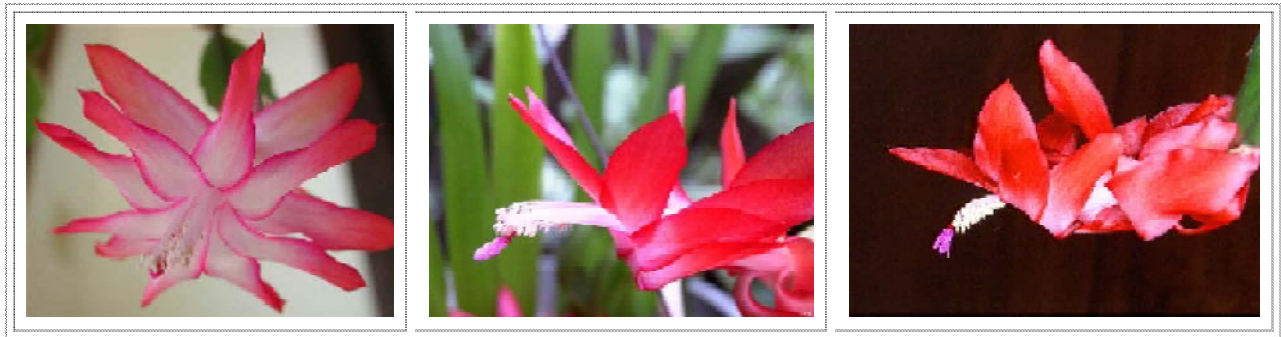
Getting Your Christmas Cactus to Bloom

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Calling a Christmas cactus a "holiday cactus" has less to do with political correctness than with the confusion as to when three species of *Schlumbergera* bloom.

The designation seems more accurate considering a Thanksgiving cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*) may display its pink to red flowers a week or two before Christmas, a Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*) may bloom magenta in November and an Easter cactus (*Schlumbergera Makoyana*) may bloom in a variety of colors for Mother's Day.



The object of this article is to tell you how to get the *Schlumbergera bridgesii*, identified by rounded notches and rounded stems, to reward you during the Christmas season. Professional nurseries have perfected the art of forcing the plants to bloom for the Christmas market. You can too.

Your cactus may be a hybrid but its needs are similar to those of the true species of jungle cacti that inhabit moist tropical forests. In the spring and summer, *Schlumbergera* do well in Tallahassee's heat and humidity if placed in medium light in a shady spot, watered plentifully to keep the soil moist but not soaked, and fertilized once every two weeks with a high-potassium, tomato-type fertilizer.

As tropical plants, at the first hint of frost cacti should be brought inside the house. Until then, leave them outside. Fall night-time temperatures of 50 to 55 degrees F. are ideal for producing buds on a cactus. If you can provide such night-time temperatures inside your house, you may keep the cactus inside.

Here, where the temperature remains between 55 and 70 degrees Fahrenheit most fall nights--too warm for bud formation--there's an alternative way to get buds to form. Thirteen hours of uninterrupted darkness will result in bud formation. If you have moved the plant indoors and the temperature is between 70 and 75 degrees, the plant requires 15 hours of darkness, but this higher temperature may cause the buds to drop before opening.

Uninterrupted darkness means no light at all--from street lights outside, or lamps in the home. Put the plant in a closet if necessary, but bring it out during daylight hours. Do not leave it in

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total darkness 24 hours a day. It takes six to nine weeks for buds to form, so schedule the procedure to match the time you want the blooms to appear.

Once buds form and cold forces you to take the plant inside, place it where drafts and rapid fluctuations in temperature do not occur. Do not move the plant to various locations or even rotate it, because the buds will turn toward the new light source and drop off.

Cease fertilizing the plant during bud formation; resume fertilizing after blooming stops and new growth begins.

In an unheated but not freezing greenhouse or garage, the cactus forms buds on its own schedule. Low night temperatures and long hours of darkness may speed up the process and produce blossoms out of season. Maybe this is why some call it a holiday cactus.

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