

October in the Tallahassee Garden

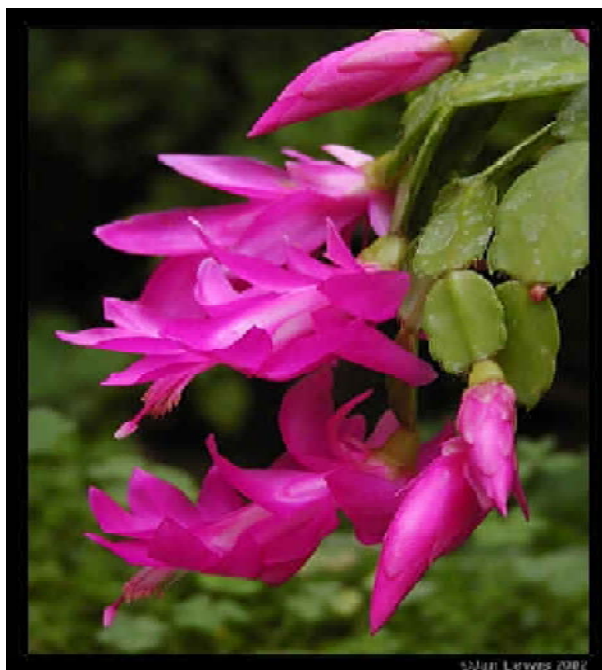


Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: If you want your Christmas cactus to bloom for Christmas, now is the time to start preparing it.

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Shrubs and Trees: Pine trees, junipers, and arborvitae all shed needles this time of year. This is normal. Use the pine needles as a mulch around shrubs and new trees. If you are buying pine straw, check to be sure that it is this year's straw. It should look and smell fresh. Old pine straw decomposes quickly and will need to be replaced soon. Leaves from deciduous trees also make good mulch. Keep mulch from contacting the main stem or trunk and don't pile it deeper than two or three inches. It's also normal for azaleas to lose a few leaves from now until spring. These are the older leaves on the stem near the center of the plant. They turn reddish or yellow and drop from the plant.

Annuals and Perennials: In late October or early November, sow seeds of annuals such as sweet peas, larkspur, poppies, pansies, calendula, and annual wildflowers directly in the ground. Keep seeded areas moist to ensure germination. Divide and transplant daylilies, liriope, ajuga, and other perennials as the weather begins to cool. As the weather begins to cool, plant pansies, snapdragons, and petunias for fall and winter bloom. Plant in full sun. For spring bloom, plant aquilegia, perennial candytuft, dianthus, Shasta daisy, and stock. Also plant spring and summer blooming perennials such as purple coneflower or rudbeckia. You can still plant garden mums for fall color.

Bulbs, Corms, and Tubers: Buy spring flowering bulbs this month. Shop early for the best selection, looking for large fresh bulbs. Bulbs which can be planted right after purchasing include daffodils, the smaller flowered jonquils, paperwhites, Dutch iris, and grape hyacinths. Tulips and other hyacinths need to be refrigerated at least 45 to 60 days to provide enough chilling to bloom properly in the spring. Plant them in late November or early December. Bulbs grow best in full sun to partial shade. They need well-drained soil. Don't plant them with other plants that require watering during dry periods. Mulch lightly during the winter months to avoid a

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moisture problem. Prepare the planting bed well to provide loose soil. Plant the bulbs about twice as deep as the bulb is tall. Make sure the bulb is planted right side up. This is usually the pointed end.

Vegetables and Herbs: Begin planting strawberries in mid to late October. They grow through the winter and produce berries in the spring. Early in the month plant mustard, spinach, celery, and Chinese cabbage. Other vegetables to plant throughout the month include beets, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, collards, garlic, kohlrabi, bulbing onions, green onions, radishes, shallots, Swiss chard, and turnips. Soak the seeds for spinach and Swiss chard overnight before planting. Plant perennial herbs such as parsley, oregano, sage, thyme, rosemary, and sweet marjoram. Sow seeds of dill, fennel, chervil and cilantro. Some hot peppers will die back in the cold weather and grow again in the late spring. Cut back in early spring.

Lawn Care: Apply a pre-emergent herbicide such as atrazine late this month if winter weeds were a problem last year. Follow label directions and precautions very carefully. Don't forget to water if the weather is dry. If you think you need to apply a "winterizer" fertilizer, do it before mid-October. The fertilizer should have little nitrogen (the first number in the fertilizer ratio), such as a 5-0-15 or 5-0-20.

Container Plants: Begin moving houseplants that have been outside, to a shady location, preparing them for lower light levels inside. Cut back and treat for pests and disease if necessary. To get a Christmas cactus or poinsettia to bloom for Christmas the plant must be in total darkness at night. Starting now place the plant in an area that receives no artificial light from 5 p.m. to 8 a.m. Keep putting it in the dark at night until you see buds form, about one month for the cactus. Give the poinsettia six to eight weeks of the darkness treatments. Between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. , they can be put in their normal growing area so that they get sufficient daylight. Some cultivars of Christmas cactus will bloom without this treatment but even those should set more buds if they are in the dark at night.

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