

Niagara College Greenhouse & Nursery Success Sheet No. 53

Christmas Cactus

While the poinsettia remains the most popular of the holiday plants, a healthy Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*) in full bloom is a great gift idea for a special person. It is easy to care for and can be grown indoors throughout the year. The flowers can be yellow, salmon, pink, fuchsia, white or combinations of those colors.

Light

While the Christmas cactus can adapt to low light, more abundant blooms are produced on plants that have been exposed to high light intensity. For this reason, keep plants in a sunny location indoors.

Move them outdoors during the summer, but keep them in a shady or semi-shady location because too much direct sunlight can burn the leaves.

When the time comes to bring the plants back inside in the fall, slowly adjust the plants to life indoors by gradually increasing the number of hours they spend indoors each day.

Soil

Well-drained soil is a must for the Christmas cactus. Use a commercially packaged potting mix made for succulent plants, or mix your own. The ideal soil for a Christmas cactus is composed of equal parts of garden loam, leaf mold, and clean, coarse sand. Add a quart of wood ashes per bucket of mix.

Water

The Christmas cactus is not a true cactus and is not quite as drought tolerant as the name implies. However, it is a succulent plant and can store a reasonable quantity of water in the

leaves. Water thoroughly when the top half of the soil in the pot feels dry.

The length of time between watering will vary with the air temperature, amount of light, rate of growth and relative humidity. During the summer, water so that the soil is continually moist. When fall arrives, water the plant only well enough to prevent wilting. During the fall, until blooming is complete, let the plant rest by withholding water for six weeks.

Fertilizing

As tender growth appears in the spring, apply a weak solution of liquid houseplant fertilizer at two to three weeks.

Re-potting

Plants should be re-potted every two to three years, or whenever the pot is filled with roots and the soil appears to be depleted of nutrients. A Christmas cactus is usually re-potted in the spring, but a plant that is unhealthy because of the root system can be re-potted at any time of the year.

Blooming

The Christmas cactus is easy to grow, but producing blooms can be a challenge. Medium light intensity and a soil high in organic matter are recommended. Do not allow the plant to dry out.

Cool temperatures and long nights (more than 12 hours of darkness) are required to induce blooming. Try to keep night temperatures around 13° C. and day temperatures around 18° C.

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