

The holiday cactus has been a favorite houseplant for many of us. It is not unusual for a single plant to be passed down from generation to generation.

There are several types of holiday cactus: 'Christmas' or 'Thanksgiving' Cactus and 'Easter' Cactus. Because both Thanksgiving and Christmas Cactus can bloom twice each year between October and February, then again between March and May, many folks tend to confuse them with Easter Cactus. However, Easter Cactus blooms only once each year in April (about Easter) and its flower is very different. Both will have beautiful blooms for about one full month.

Indoor Culture Only

Treat your cactus as a regular houseplant for most of the year. Keep it in a bright location and let it dry out between watering. To promote bloom at holiday time, give your cactus long uninterrupted dark periods, about 12 hours each night. For timely blooms, begin the dark treatments in mid-October. You can place the plants in a dark closet from about 8PM to 8AM each night for 6-8 weeks or until you see buds forming.

Alternately, cacti can be encouraged to bloom if they are subjected to cool temperatures of about 50-55° F for about 6 weeks. This will eliminate the need for dark treatments. Remember to water less during this time of bud formation.

Outdoor/Indoor Cactus

One of the easiest treatments for healthy culture and plentiful, correctly-timed flowers is to summer cacti outside in dappled or light shade. Put cactus outdoors after the last frost in spring (about May 15th). Then, bring your plant inside about a week before the first frost in fall (about October 15th). Keeping your plants outside fulfills the cooling requirements (lower than about 59°F) and shortened daylight requirements (25 days with nights at least 12 hours long) necessary to get your plant to set buds.

During September and October, keep plants on the drier side. Bring indoors when the buds have formed. Once the plant is indoors, place in bright indirect light away from temperature extremes like drafts and hot air vents.

General Cultural Care

Plants should be watered thoroughly but need to dry out between watering. Fertilize monthly from April to September with a general purpose fertilizer. Unless plants are young and outgrow their pots, annual repotting is not needed. Cacti plants do not have a vigorous root system and like to be a bit root bound.

Pests, Diseases, Prevention and Cure

Cacti are rarely bothered by bugs. Mealy bug can sometimes be a problem. If a small infestation develops, dab them with a bit of rubbing alcohol on a cotton ball. If a heavier infestation occurs, spray with insecticidal soap repeated at weekly intervals.