

I hope you're all enjoying the holidays and have had some time to sit down and put your feet up and relax. Today's column is about two of those flowering plants you might have purchased.

**Poinsettias** – Poinsettias belong to the euphorbia family. The red (pink, white) petals you see are really leaves and the true flowers are the green and yellow b-b shaped structures you see in the center of all the color. Water your poinsettias each week (keeping soil moist, not soggy) and they'll continue to reward you with colorful foliage until at least March. Then just consider them an annual and allow yourself to throw them out with the trash. Having said that I have two huge pots of combined poinsettias in our daylight basement that I couldn't bear to discard. They are happily growing into trees (like they do in Mexico) and every winter several red leaves emerge to remind me that they were once Christmas flowers.

**Christmas Cactus** – Here's the straight scoop on Christmas/Thanksgiving/Easter cacti. Before we begin, repeat after me, "They really are easy to grow." Keep repeating that phrase every time you read an article telling you how difficult they are to grow. This group of plants is now being called "Holiday cacti." The plants are epiphytic plants native to Brazil and grow in trees in the Organ Mountains (22 south latitude). Temperatures are usually a constant 60-70 F and rainfall is 17 inches per month during December through March.

Now called holiday cacti we've known them as Schlumbergera and some plant tags might label them Zygocactus, Ehipyllum, Cereus or Cactus. If you were really lucky labels might have read *Schlumbergera truncata* (it has yellow anthers on the flowers) or *Schlumbergera bridgesii* (flowers with purple anthers). Many of the epiphytes we purchase during the holidays are actually crosses of these cultivars. To further complicate matters, the Easter Cacti are really *Rhipsalidopsis gaertneri*. I hear you muttering, "What's she talking about? Speak English!" Bear with me a couple more minutes and we'll get to the "easy" part of growing these plants.

Schlumbergera were named after a Belgian horticulturist, Frederick Schlumberger. Europeans call it "Crab cactus." (Look at the leaves.) In Brazil the plant flowers during April and May. Leaves of Schlumbergera have (joints) with serrated edges. Rhipsalidopsis have narrower more rounded leaves with tiny hairs along the edges. Some Rhipsalidopsis look fern like. Blooms of all these holiday cacti are bright and colorful in shades of red, pink, purple, orange, yellow and white. The Schlumbergera flowers are longer with blooms strung together festooning the tips of the leaf segments. Rhipsalidopsis blooms are star shaped single flowers, again on the tips of the leaves.

Many recommend cold temperatures, special soil, and periods of dry soil to get these cacti to bloom. Most commonly you'll read "put the plant in a cold place (garage) for several weeks or months to gain blooms." Researchers found that letting the cacti dry out actually inhibits bloom. And, in a garage, you could lose the plant to chill or neglect. Remember where the plants grow in nature. Their growing conditions are actually similar to orchids and African violets. African violet potting soil is a good growing medium as is regular potting soil. Don't use a cactus mix (it drains too quickly).

Holiday cacti like plenty of light but not direct sunlight. If you have success growing African violets place the cacti in the same area and they'll do fine. My most prolific blooming holiday cacti sits about six feet away from a northwest-facing window on the sunniest side of the house. It blooms at least four times a year. I've had the plant for seven years and have only repotted it twice. I'll be repotting it as soon as it finishes blooming this month. When I remember to fertilize I use a liquid fertilizer (Schultz 12-15-10). But I promise you, the plant thrives on neglect. I water it about every other week in the winter and once a week in the summer when I remember.

Much plant lore recommends putting these holiday plants outside in the summer. My friend Susie in Alameda has her cacti hanging in a pot in a tree on her patio where the cacti happily grows all year long. However, our weather isn't as houseplant friendly as some other areas of the country. My motto is keep indoor plants indoors. Another motto is "if it isn't broken, don't fix it." If your plants are thriving continue doing what you're doing. One other perk of keeping houseplants in the house is that they very rarely get unfriendly critters sucking and munching on their leaves. Until next week, happy indoor gardening. And a very happy new year.

You can email comments to Peg at [gardenmentor@yahoo.com](mailto:gardenmentor@yahoo.com) or in care of this newspaper.