

I hope you're all enjoyed your holiday and have had some time to relax. Today's column is about two of those flowering plants you might have purchased for the festivities.

**Poinsettias** – Poinsettias belong to the euphorbia family. The red (pink, white, speckled) petals you see are really leaves. 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 consider them an annual. Give yourself permission to throw them in the trash or compost. I had two huge pots of combined poinsettias in our daylight basement for years growing happily into trees (like they do in Mexico). Every winter several red leaves emerged to remind me 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." Remember this 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 growing in trees in the Organ Mountains (22 south latitude) with temperatures a constant 60-70 F and rainfall at 17 inches per month during December through March.

We've known these plants as Schlumbergera. Some plant tags might label them Zygocactus, Epiphyllum, Cereus or Cactus. Some labels read *Schlumbergera truncata* (with yellow anthers on the flowers) or *Schlumbergera bridgesii* (flowers with purple anthers). Many of the epiphytes we purchase are 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 on the tips of the leaves.

Many books and articles 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. In nature their growing conditions are actually similar to orchids and African violets. African violet potting soil is a good growing medium. 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 west-facing window on the sunniest side of the house. It blooms at least four times a year. I've had the plant for ten years and have only repotted it three times. Repot holiday cacti as soon as it's done blooming. 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. If you forget to water too long the plant looks wilted. It will tell you if it's unhappy.

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 they very rarely get unfriendly critters sucking and munching on their leaves. Until next week, happy indoor gardening.

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