

# CHRISTMAS CACTUS

The Christmas Cactus (*Zygocactus truncatus*) is a slow-growing succulent plant composed of many toothed, leaf-like segments. Its spectacular blossoms, which look like some sort of exotic bird in flight, are worth waiting for.

For best results with the Christmas Cactus, Michigan State University horticulturists advise nurserymen to tell customers to shelve the idea that cacti like to be dry. The Christmas Cactus can't tolerate the parched conditions under which other cacti thrive. It should be watered whenever the soil surface starts to dry out.

Pot the Christmas Cactus in equal parts potting soil and peat moss. Well-drained potting mixture such as cactus potting soil.

Fertilize once or twice a month with a standard houseplant fertilizer when the plant is growing vigorously. Full sun in fall and winter and bright diffused light in spring and summer are best. Average home temperatures and humidity levels are adequate for good growth.

The Christmas Cactus is stimulated to form flower buds under two conditions: 1) when it is exposed to 12 to 14 hours of complete darkness each night or 2) when it is exposed to temperatures of 55 degrees F or lower (colder). To induce a Christmas Cactus bloom around the holiday, start the short day, long night treatment around the first of September, and continue it until buds have formed.

Keep the plant out of hot drafts and areas where the light is dim. Low light levels or high temperatures will cause flower buds to drop off.

## CALENDAR OF CARE

**DECEMBER (SECOND HALF)-JANUARY** - Place plant in sunny location where it will receive a minimum of 4 hours of sunlight daily. Keep soil evenly moist, but don't over water. Protect from drafts. Provide low night temperature of 60 degrees F (16 degrees C).

**FEBRUARY**- Cut off wilted flowers and straggly growth. Relocate to a cool shady place of 50-60 degrees F (10 -16 degrees C). Do not water. Do not feed.

**MARCH**- Move cactus to a sunnier place. Increase watering frequency to once every 3 weeks. Repot, only if needed; use a porous sandy soil mixture in a well-drained pot; cactus soil is fine.

**APRIL**- Increase watering to twice monthly. Feed every 2 weeks until September, with a low nitrogen water soluble plant food at half the recommended dosage. Such as 15-30-15 analysis.

**MAY-JUNE**- Water once weekly.

**JULY-AUGUST**- Water twice each week. Take and root cuttings: break off a newly grown stem; allow it to dry for 3 days; place it atop a moist mixture of equal parts sand and peatmoss; place it in the shade for 5 weeks; water during the 4 week. From then on, treat as other Christmas Cactus.

**SEPTEMBER**- Gradually decrease watering schedule to twice monthly. Cease feeding.

**OCTOBER-NOVEMBER**- Decrease watering to once every 3 weeks. Provide 12 to 15 hours of darkness a night by covering the plant with a paper bag and/or hiding it in a cool closet. Avoid northern exposures if the night temperature in your home falls below 50 degrees F (10 degrees C).

**DECEMBER**- Discontinue closeting. Decrease watering to once monthly.

## PETERSON

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