



## *Bucks Country Gardens*

### **How To Care For Your Christmas Cactus**

The Christmas cactus is native to tropical rain forests, unlike the vast majority of cacti, which grow in dry desert areas. In nature, this plant grows on trees and shrubs, its roots serving as a means of secure attachment to the host; most other cacti grow rooted in the ground. As a result of these dissimilarities and others, the Christmas cactus is cared for quite differently than most of its relatives.

#### **LIGHT**

The Christmas cactus requires direct sunlight. However, during the summer months when light intensity is high this plant may need protection from the midday sun, which can burn the stems. Thus, during summer, move the plant a few feet from the window, close to sheer curtains, partially close to Venetian blinds, or place the plant in a window, which receives indirect light.

#### **WATER**

The Christmas cactus should be watered when the top inch of soil in the container feels decidedly dry to the touch. Then, soak the soil thoroughly, until water comes through the drainage holes in the bottom of the pot. Wait 15 minutes and discard the excess water, which has accumulated in the drip plate beneath the container.

#### **HUMIDITY**

This cactus grows best when humidity is high. The best way to increase humidity is to place the pot, with its drip plate, on a tray filled with small pebbles. Pour water over the pebbles, but do not allow the water to rise above the bottom of the top layer of pebbles. The water will evaporate from the tray and humidify the air around the plant.

#### **SOIL**

A soil mix consisting of equal parts of peat moss, perlite and packaged potting soil is suitable for the Christmas cactus. Add 1-teaspoon dolomitic limestone and 1 teaspoon 5-10-5 fertilizer for each 2 quarts of soil used.

#### **FERTILIZER**

Fertilize the plant with a water-soluble chemical fertilizer recommended for flowering houseplants. Apply fertilizer every month at full strength or every 2 weeks at half the strength suggested on the label. Reduce the frequency of fertilization from autumn until after plants have flowered and new growth has begun.

#### **PESTS**

Mealybugs often infect the Christmas cactus. These pests resemble tiny wads of white cotton wool and are usually found on the undersides of stems or between the stem links. Minor infestations can be controlled by hand picking with a cotton swab dipped in alcohol. Another effective control is washing plants with a weak soapy water and a soft brush or cloth. The soil should be covered with aluminum foil to prevent soap contamination.

## **PROPAGATION**

Stem cuttings are the easiest means of propagating this cactus. Cuttings of 3-5 stem segments (links) will root readily in moist vermiculite. Planting several cuttings in a 4-inch pot will produce a full plant relatively fast.

## **FLOWERING**

Both temperature and day length effect the flowering of the Christmas cactus. Flower buds will form under the following conditions:

- If the night temperature is maintained at 50-55 degrees F., buds will be produced regardless of day length
- If the temperature is between 55 and 70 degrees, 13 hours of uninterrupted darkness will result in bud formation.
- If the temperature is between 70 and 75 degrees, 15 hours of uninterrupted darkness will result in bud formation. However, buds produced under warmer temperatures may drop before opening. Thus, the first two conditions are preferred.

Uninterrupted darkness means NO light during the dark period. This includes light from lamps inside the home and from street lamps outdoors.

To provide the dark periods described under conditions 2 and 3, plants can be covered with black cloth or placed in a light-tight closet during the night. (Realize that if the temperature inside the closet is in the 70-75 degree range, 15 hours of darkness are required, as described under condition 3.)

Plants must be given darkness each night until buds are produced, approximately 6 to 9 weeks. (Remember that if plants are grown in a cool location, 50 to 55 degrees, they do not require a dark period.)

A common and grave mistake is to leave plants in the dark 24 hours a day. The Christmas cactus requires direct light every day following the dark period.

## **PREVENTING PREMATURE FLOWER BUD DROP**

Flower buds dropping before they open is a complaint commonly heard from those growing the Christmas cactus. To prevent bud drop avoid drafts and rapid fluctuation in temperature after buds have been set; water correctly, as described above; keep humidity high; and avoid moving the plant from one place to another once color is visible in the buds.