

Schlumbergera bridgesii (Christmas Cactus)

Botanical Bytes
By Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 12"-18"
Foliage Width: 12"-36"
Foliage Color: Green
Flower Color: Red
USDA Hardiness: 9-11
Moisture: Average
Light: Sunny Window



The wonderful time of year known as the Christmas season is a fertile ground for the pleasant memories of childhood to germinate. It reminds one of the scent of pine boughs in the air, seas of poinsettias covering the benches of the local greenhouses, and that odd plant at Grandma's that burst into vibrant color in that corner sunny window at a time of year when everything else was white, gray, and snow-covered outside.

Schlumbergera bridgesii, our beloved Christmas cactus, has gathered many names as it has captured the hearts of plant lovers all over the world for over a century. Weihnachtskaktus, Cactus de Noel, Cacto de Navidad, and Flor de Maio are just a few. Whatever language it is said in, they all are a symbol of a magical time of year.

The mountains north of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, are the native range of this unique beauty. This epiphytic cactus is at home clinging to the trunks and branches of the forest trees. The roots are mainly used in anchoring the plant, while specialized stomata (openings in the leaves) absorb moisture from the air, allowing the plant to stay hydrated. The climate epiphytes grow in is wildly different than that of their desert cactus cousins, affecting how we care for this amazing leafy family member.

Water and light are two of the keys to making this cactus happy. Morning sun is preferred because too much sun can cause sunburn (the leaves turning red) and undue plant stress. Moisture is often as easy as watering once per week. The top inch of soil should dry between each watering. Humidity to simulate its home tropical forest can be accomplished by sitting the pot on a saucer filled with pebbles and keeping the saucer filled with water.

The type of soil appropriate for Christmas cactus is wildly debated. Luckily for the average plant lover, there are some basic needs. These cacti normally grow with their roots exposed to the air, which means soil media should have lots of air space and be very well drained. A homegrown mix would be as simple as 50-60% quality potting soil + 40-50% vermiculite or coarse sand. The target pH should 5.0-6.0. Repotting should be done every 2-3 years.

Grandma's love and magic always nurtured the flowers to explode at the right time. Does this mean we could never be successful coaxing flowers out for the Christmas season? There are a few natural triggers we can use to our advantage in this quest for flowers. Cooler temperatures will trigger bud production; night temperatures of 55 degrees and day temperatures of 65 degrees from October to December will trigger flower formation. I personally prefer the old "put the plant in the closet trick". Placing your plant in a dark place (like a closet) for 12 hours per day (for 6-8 weeks or until flower buds are seen) will mimic the natural day length that causes flower formation.

Diseases can be avoided by proper watering. If you're not sure if the plant needs water, wait a day or two. It is safer to err on the dry side than keep the roots soggy. Creepy pests are limited to aphids on flowers occasionally, and a mild soapy solution spray can handle this minor issue effectively.

Having a Christmas cactus is a beautiful way to add color to your home this holiday season. These leafy family members may come with a long history from your family's past or maybe you want to begin the tradition for your family. Whichever is the case, this is a wonderful way to do it.