

HOME & GARDEN

On Christmas cactus care and green gifts

By PAT LEUCHTMAN
Recorder Columnist

Some plants are so identified with a holiday that it takes the holiday for its name — a case in point is the Christmas cactus.

Although it is called a cactus, it is not a native of the burning desert. Its botanical name is *zycocactus tuncatus* and it originated high in the treetops of the humid Brazilian jungle where it grew in the leaf-filled crotches of trees. Knowing this it is easy to remember that the Christmas cactus should never be placed where it will receive strong direct sunlight; it is used to sun filtered through the jungle foliage. Neither should it be severely deprived of water.

It should be grown in a potting soil rich in organic matter. A good mixture would be two parts garden loam, two parts peat moss and one part well-rotted or dried cow manure. This rich soil will make your cactus thrive. When the plant is blooming, it will also welcome an occasional feeding with a complete house plant fertil-

izer. My favorite is fish emulsion.

Christmas cactus is not a difficult plant to grow, but some people have said they have difficulty in getting the plant to bloom. Two hints might eliminate this difficulty.

First, the Christmas cactus is a short-day plant. This means that it needs at least 12 hours of total darkness every day for about six weeks before it will set buds. Although it usually needs much more water than a cactus, British horticulturist Thalassa Cruso says that she does not water her Christmas cactus for the whole month of October and this virtually guarantees good bud set.

When the buds are set, start watering again and water moderately during the period of bloom, which should last through the holidays and into January and even into February. When bloom is over, cut down on the watering again until new growth has started and then water freely. During the summer the Christmas cactus will welcome a stay in a shady part of the

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garden. If it must be kept indoors, do not put it in a south window.

In September bring the plant indoors, remembering that an east or west window is most desirable.

Because the Christmas cactus is not difficult to grow it makes an ideal gift and its arching, jointed flat leaves tipped with 2- or 3-inch red blossoms are always welcome.

I'd like to mention briefly another handful of houseplants that make good Christmas presents just because they are easy to care for and very nearly indestructible.

First there is that old standby, the philodendron. This can be very handsome hanging by a window especially if it is pinched back to maintain a bushy growth habit. It will do well in poor

light and is a plant that does very well under artificial light.

A close relative to the philodendron is pothos which is similar in growth and appearance, but its leaves are an attractive variegated green and yellow. Like the philodendron it can grow spindly, but the trailing stems can be wound around the pot and held in place on the soil with hairpins. If the stem is slightly cut and wounded and then pushed into the soil, roots will form at that spot and the plant will be healthier as well as more attractive.

The spider plant is a handsome hanging plant and the trailing baby spiders make an interesting silhouette in front of a window. It comes in a solid green or variegated green and white varieties. It will start to throw out babies when the mother plant is slightly pot-bound so do not plant in an oversized container.

The hoye or wax plant is another hanging plant but it can become straggly. The trailing

stems should be wound up and attached to a support placed in the pot. It has thick, waxy-looking dark green leaves that are very attractive by themselves, but when those stems have grown long enough, you will be rewarded by sweet scented bloom. Do not be tempted to cut off those untidy stems or the plant will be prevented from blooming.

Finally there is the spathiphyllum which is a valuable plant because it will tolerate a low light level and yet will throw up an interesting stylized white flower from the midst of its tender arching leaves. One of the few things that will bother this plant is underwatering. For this reason it should be grown in a plastic pot and watered well. It will be obvious when the plant is getting dry because it will droop miserably. Fortunately, it is easily revived by a good drink of water.

So many Christmas gifts are ephemeral, but a green and growing plant will give pleasure for months or even years to come.