

How to Grow and Care for the Thanksgiving Cactus

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The Thanksgiving cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*) is a popular tropical cactus that is sold around the holidays for its gorgeous and prolific flowers. As its common name indicates, the Thanksgiving cactus is known for blooming around Thanksgiving, bringing a splash of color into your home just as the weather outdoors is getting colder.

With a mature size of only 6 to 12 inches tall and 1 to 2 feet wide, the Thanksgiving cactus is a low-maintenance plant that can also live a long life of 20 to 30 years.



The Spruce / Adrienne Legault

It is one of three common holiday cacti that are often confused with one another: the Thanksgiving cactus, the Christmas cactus, and the Easter cactus. While they all look similar, they are technically three different species of *Schlumbergera* with unique care requirements.

Encouraging your cactus to put on a show of gorgeous flowers just in time for the holidays is simply a matter of providing your plant with the proper light conditions and care.

Botanical Name *Schlumbergera truncata*

Common Name Thanksgiving cactus, crab cactus, false Christmas cactus, holiday cactus, winter cactus

Family Cactaceae

Plant Type Cactus

Mature Size 12-24 in. long, 12-24 in. wide

Sun Exposure Partial, shade

Soil Type Moist but well-drained

Soil pH Acidic

Bloom Time Fall

Flower Color Red, pink, orange, white

Hardiness 10a, 10b, 11a, 11b, 12a, 12b

Zones

Native Area South America

How to Care for the Thanksgiving Cactus

Here are the main care needs to keep in mind for the Thanksgiving cactus:

- They do well in typical household conditions and don't need to be fussed over.
- They do well in indirect light during the warmer seasons, and prefer brighter indirect light in the fall and winter.
- A mixed soil is best for the Thanksgiving cactus. Try a blend of peat moss, perlite, and orchid bark.
- The soil of a Thanksgiving cactus should be kept continuously moist but never waterlogged.



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Light

In the spring and summer, the Thanksgiving cactus does best in medium indirect light. Prior to blooming in the fall, move it to a brighter location, but avoid direct sun. A spot that gets bright, indirect light is perfect.

Soil

In its natural environment, the Thanksgiving cactus grows from trees, surviving off of the decaying organic matter from the bark. When it is grown as a houseplant, the Thanksgiving cactus should be grown in a potting mix that is humus-rich, airy, and well-draining with an acidic pH. One part peat moss, one part perlite, and one part orchid bark is a perfect mixture.

Water

A proper watering routine is one of the most important parts of keeping a Thanksgiving cactus happy. The soil should be kept consistently moist and should not be allowed to fully dry out. However, a Thanksgiving cactus should also never be waterlogged as it is sensitive to overwatering. Allow the top 1-2 inches of soil to dry between watering and then water thoroughly until water drains out of the drainage hole in the bottom of the pot.

Temperature and Humidity

These tropical cacti thrive in warm, humid conditions. Ideally, keep the humidity around your Thanksgiving cactus above 50 percent, and temperatures between 60 to 65 degrees Fahrenheit

(15 to 20 degrees Celsius). Average household temperatures are usually adequate for Thanksgiving cacti.

Fertilizer

The Thanksgiving cactus should be fertilized regularly throughout the growing season to help promote blooming in the fall. Apply a balanced, diluted liquid fertilizer every two weeks during the spring, summer, and early fall. After the blooms have dropped, stop fertilizing the cactus until new growth begins in the spring.

Pruning

Regular pruning helps to create a healthy, bushy plant and even helps the plant to produce more blooms in the fall. It is best to prune a Thanksgiving cactus during the spring once new growth has started emerging. Every cut that you make will encourage branching at that location, so choose your cuts wisely. Make sure you save any cuttings that you take off of your plant for propagation!

Propagating the Thanksgiving Cactus

Thanksgiving cactus propagate prolifically from stem cuttings. Propagation is best done in the spring and summer when the cactus is in its active growing period. Avoid propagating during the winter once the Thanksgiving cactus has gone into dormancy.

Propagating a Thanksgiving cactus is not only a great way to repurpose pruning cuttings, but can also help you fill out an existing plant, or create new plants! Here's how you can propagate by stem cuttings in a few simple steps:

1. Using a pair of sterilized pruning shears or scissors take several leaf/stem cuttings (about 2-3 leaf segments long each).
2. Set the cuttings aside in a cool, dry location for 24 hours to allow the cut ends to callous over.
3. Prepare the potting container by filling a small plastic pot with pre-moistened potting soil.
4. Plant the callused cuttings upright in the potting soil. Ensure that the cuttings are facing the same direction they were growing previously (i.e. don't plant them "upside down").

How to Get the Thanksgiving Cactus to Bloom

When grown indoors, the Thanksgiving cactus might need a bit of help in order to bloom each year. Flowering results from shorter, colder days for several weeks.

This can be achieved by placing your Thanksgiving cactus outdoors in the early fall to expose it to colder temperatures, or by manufacturing these conditions indoors. Thanksgiving cacti that are slightly pot-bound tend to bloom more easily, so wait to repot your cactus until the spring every

year. Deadheading spent blooms will help to prolong the blooming period and encourage more blooms.

Bloom Months

True to its name, the Thanksgiving cactus blooms in the late fall around Thanksgiving every year. Blooming season usually lasts from November to March. In the right light and temperature conditions, individual flowers last about 7 to 8 weeks.

What Do Thanksgiving Cactus Flowers Look Like?

While some growers enjoy the Thanksgiving cactus for its foliage, most people grow these tropical cacti for their stunning and prolific tube-shaped blooms that can come in shades of red, pink, orange, yellow, and white.

How to Encourage More Blooms

If your cactus is hesitant to bloom or is on its second blooming cycle, you can take some steps to actually force your plant to bloom at a particular time. The easiest method is to introduce your plant to more cold temperatures. For six or more weeks, put your cactus outside overnight, if temperatures are around 50-55 degrees. Stop doing so if the temperature falls below 40 degrees.

You can also opt to keep your plant in complete darkness for at least 12 straight hours per day for a stretch of several weeks. This will also trick your plant into producing buds.

Caring for Thanksgiving Cactus After It Blooms

After blooming season, your cactus will need a period of rest, during which time you can reduce your watering frequency and your plant will become even more low-maintenance.

Deadheading Thanksgiving Cactus Flowers

As with many plants, you should deadhead your Thanksgiving cactus and remove any spent blooms once they start to die off. This will keep your plant's energy focused and leave space for new blooms.

Common Problems With Thanksgiving Cacti

Overall, Thanksgiving cacti are relatively problem-free and easy to grow indoors. Common problems tend to arise from improper watering or issues with blooming.

No Blooms

Growers often force Thanksgiving cacti to bloom just prior to selling them during the holiday season and it is not uncommon that the plants don't bloom during their second year. You may have to wait patiently for a year or two before you see blooms again. Additionally, you will need to provide your Thanksgiving cactus with the proper conditions in order to induce blooming indoors, otherwise it is unlikely they will bloom naturally.

Flower Buds Falling Off

Thanksgiving cacti are sensitive to changes in temperature and environment, and if they are exposed to drastic changes during flowering it is not uncommon for the plants to begin dropping buds and flowers. Ensure that you provide a stable, consistent environment during blooming to prevent this.

Leaves Turning Yellow

Yellowing leaves can be an indication of two different problems. If the leaves are turning yellow and mushy, overwatering is likely the issue. Ensure that you have proper drainage and the roots are not left sitting in water. Yellowing leaves can also be an indication of too much sunlight. Avoid placing your Thanksgiving cactus in direct sunlight.

FAQ

What is the difference between the Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter cactus?

There are two main differences between these three popular holiday cacti. First, while the Thanksgiving cactus has leaves with sharp-toothed edges, the Christmas cactus has scalloped or teardrop-shaped leaves, and the Easter cactus has leaves with rounded edges.

The second difference is the timing of blooms. The Thanksgiving cactus most commonly blooms in the late fall, while the Christmas cactus blooms in early to late winter, and the Easter cactus blooms in the early spring.

Where is the best place to put a Thanksgiving cactus?

Ideally, choose a location in your home with bright but indirect light. Next to a north- or east-facing window is often a good option.

What triggers a Thanksgiving cactus to bloom?

The light and temperature conditions are primary factors that trigger Thanksgiving cacti to bloom. They grow during the warm months, but produce flowers around November, or when they're receiving long stretches of darkness and temperatures are lower.

Does a Thanksgiving cactus bloom more than once per year?

Thanksgiving cactus bloom every year from March to November. While they have an initial flowering in the spring, they usually have a second bloom in the fall around Thanksgiving.