



By Barbara Elmore, HCMG

Coaxing Christmas Cactus to Bloom

People have asked the last couple years how I get my Christmas cactus to bloom, and I have responded profoundly: "Beats me!"

OK — not very helpful except to restore the self-esteem of gardeners with barren cactus. So I decided to find out what a person can do to coax those blooms.

The best course of action is to buy a cactus with buds in November, wait for them to mature, and hope the show repeats itself the next year. That's what happened with mine, which arrived as a gift in October 2007. My thank-you card featured a photo of the lovely bloomer on the front, so that the givers could see what those tiny buds had become.

The blooms that have returned annually are dumb luck. But there are people who advise that we CAN do certain things to get ensure an encore each year. The trick is to start paying more attention to the cactus in September.

The Christmas cactus, also called a holiday cactus, is an epiphyte from tropical climes. Epiphyte means that it grows on other plants, like on the branches of trees. Tropical means temperate — not too hot, not too cold.

The first thing I did when I got my new cactus was read the directions that came with it. I learned that it didn't like temps below 45 degrees and wanted bright, indirect light. Also, I was to water only when the soil was dry to the touch. So my cactus spends its springs and summers outside and part of fall indoors. Our thermostat stays on 70 in the winter, and the cactus seems to think that's OK. But it would probably be happier in a bright area that's cooler and that doesn't get drafts. A window sill away from a door sounds about right.

Since it still likes bright light during the day, I put the cactus on the front porch anytime the temperature climbs into the 50s and above and bring it in again at night. This has likely confused it. This year I won't move it out again until spring.



Gardeners also offer this advice, some of which I have followed:

1. The cactus needs 12 hours of darkness each night. If you have it in area where people turn the lights on and off frequently, move it or put a box over it at night.
2. To set buds, the holiday cactus requires temperatures of 50 to 60 degrees, which is a good reason to leave it outside until temperatures near freezing. Then move it to a cool spot in your house--or to a greenhouse, if you have one.
3. Don't jostle the plant or the buds will fall off. So when you move it indoors, it's best to leave it alone until all the blooms are spent.

If you do all these things and your cactus still doesn't bloom, remember that experimentation is a gardener's fallback tool. And never count out dumb luck.

