KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension Wildcat District

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For more information, contact Kenny Dodson
Horticulture Agent, Wildcat Extension District
dodsonke@ksu.edu, 620-670-5018

The Cactus That Saved Christmas

With the holidays approaching, everyone is buying and displaying poinsettias or amaryllis. However, there is only one plant named the Christmas cactus… which actually blooms in November.

The beloved houseplant that many know as the 'Christmas cactus' is definitely a cactus, but not the desert kind of cactus. While some bloom around Christmas, many of the cacti that are sold might bloom around Thanksgiving. This is because they are all slightly different plants.

The Christmas cactus and its cousin, the Thanksgiving cactus, are both species in the *Schlumbergera* genus. True Christmas cactus is known scientifically as *Schlumbergera russelliana*, while Thanksgiving cactus is *Schlumbergera truncata*. There is also a hybrid of the two, *Schlumbergera* x *buckleyi*, which is the one found most often in stores. Lastly, there is another holiday-themed cactus, the Easter cactus, which is a species of *Rhipsalidopsis*.

With all of these cacti, what's the difference? The names give a big hint. Thanksgiving cactus tends to flower in fall or early winter, as do some of the commercial hybrids. Christmas cactus, as the name implies, flowers in late December, while Easter cactus actually flowers in spring. Just like poinsettia, the two wintery cacti will flower when the days become shorter. The Easter cactus, and other *Rhipsalidopsis* species, flowers after several weeks of dark days.

For the difference in the flowers themselves, the *Schlumbergera* species have the usual long, extended flowers and the Easter cactus has a more circular shape. The colors are commonly red, pink, or magenta for most varieties in stores, though white and yellow colors exist in the genetics. Another distinction is that their 'leaves', specifically called cladodes, have pointed edges on the Thanksgiving cactus and rounded lobes on the other two.

When it comes to care, the most important thing to remember is that these cacti are native to South American forests, not deserts. They tend to grow on or against trees, a type of plant known as an epiphyte. They prefer bright, indirect light, like they would receive on a tree branch. They prefer more frequent watering than a dessert cactus does, but still don't want to drown. A well-draining mix and weekly watering are ideal. Do not treat them like a desert cactus.

With all of this in mind, the holiday cacti on the store shelves have a lot more depth. This beautiful plant is on display right now, so treat it well and enjoy the blooms!

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