

HORTICULTURE

Hort Hotline

December 2010



Cooperative
Extension Service

Franklin County
101 Lakeview Court
Frankfort, KY 40601
(502) 695-9035
Fax: (502) 695-9309
www.ca.uky.edu/ces
ces.ca.uky.edu/Franklin/Horticulture



CHRISTMAS CACTUS

Prepared by Nancy Doubrava, HGIC
Information Specialist and Al Pertuit,
Extension Floriculture Specialist,
Clemson University.

Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*) is a popular, winter-flowering houseplant native to Brazil, available in a wide variety of colors including red, purple, oranges, pinks and creams. Its pendulous stems make it a great choice for hanging baskets.

Christmas cactus is a member of a group sold as holiday cacti that includes the Thanksgiving cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*) and the Easter cactus (*Rhipsalidopsis gaertneri*). When grown under normal night length conditions, Thanksgiving cacti normally flower near Thanksgiving approximately a month before Christmas cacti. The Easter cactus flowers primarily in the spring and sporadically throughout the year. All of the holiday cacti have similar cultural requirements.

CULTURE

Light and Temperature: The Christmas cactus grows best in light shade. Full sunlight is beneficial in mid-winter, but bright sun during the summer months can make plants look pale and yellow. Ideal growth occurs at temperatures between 70 to 80 °F during its growing season from April to September. Do not let temperatures rise above 90 °F once the flower buds are set in the fall. Continuous warm temperatures can cause flower buds to drop.

The secret of good flower bud production involves temperature and dark (photoperiod) control. To flower plants need:

- ♣ Bright light

- ♣ Night temperatures between 55 and 65 °F
- ♣ Long nights - Thirteen hours or more of continuous darkness each day is required before flowering will occur. Long nights should be started about the middle of September and continued for eight weeks.

Watering and Fertilizer: Water the growing medium when it is dry to the touch. The Christmas cactus is tolerant of dry, slightly under-watered conditions. Do not let the soil become waterlogged, especially during the dark days of winter. Do not let the soil dry out either. Reduce watering from fall through spring. Fertilize plants monthly from the time new growth starts in late winter or early spring, and throughout the summer using a one-quarter strength soluble fertilizer. Reduce fertilizer during the fall and early winter.

Growing Media: The Christmas cactus flowers best when kept somewhat potbound. Repotting is necessary only about once in three years. The potting media must be well-drained with good aeration, because the Christmas cactus does not grow well in heavy, wet mixes. A good mix may contain one part potting soil, two parts peat moss or compost, and one part sharp sand or perlite.

PROBLEMS

The Christmas cacti commonly drops unopened flower buds, which may be induced by an excessive number of buds or a sudden change in temperature, light or other environmental factors, such as drying out of the

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growing medium. Lack of flowering is often due to light interrupting the long night period (13 hours) that is required for flowering initiation to occur. Street lights, car lights or indoor lighting can disrupt the required dark period. The major disease is root rot, which can be prevented by avoiding excessive watering. Insects and related pests include mealybugs, soft brown scale, red spider mites and aphids. 🍷



Home Hort Hints

Rick Durham, Consumer Horticulture Extension Specialist, University of Kentucky

Storing and testing vegetable seeds.

The seed catalogs have started showing up in my mailbox and I'm faced with the usual question, "How many different things can I buy and still have room to walk in my garden?" At the same time, if you're like me, your eyes are much bigger than your garden, and there were many seeds left over from last season. Are these seeds still viable? Is there a good chance they will germinate if planted?

You bet. Most vegetable seeds remain viable for three years or more when stored properly, but storage conditions are very important. It's best to keep seeds as dry as possible—enclosing them in a glass jar or other airtight container may be helpful. Although refrigeration is not necessary, keeping seeds as cool as possible, but not freezing, will also prolong their life.

If seeds have been kept for a long time, check their germination by placing some seeds between moist paper towels and enclose them in a plastic bag. Place the bag in a warm location and check for germination in a few days or up to about two weeks. If germination is low, discard the seed lot, or increase planting density when you sow the seeds in your garden.

Keep evergreens watered this winter.

Most plants in the landscape enter dormancy during the winter. While such plants remain alive, and even to some extent biologically active during dormancy, their need for care during the winter months is minimal. The same cannot be said for evergreens. Evergreens in the landscape will certainly slow down their growth rate during winter, but their growth does not cease all together. Their need for water during the winter months is especially crucial. Unlike deciduous plants, evergreens continue to use water during winter, and it is important to keep them well watered, even during the winter months.

During winter thaws, check the soil around evergreen plants to make sure it is moist. If not, apply water—enough to wet the soil several inches deep. Water other woody and herbaceous plants in the landscape as needed to keep them from drying severely. But remember, applying water to frozen soil is of little benefit since most of the water will run off and not penetrate the soil.

If you haven't already done so, apply a layer of mulch around plants to help conserve soil moisture and moderate soil temperature fluctuations.

It's not too late to plant bulbs.



You may have noticed that many retailers are putting their spring flowering bulbs on clearance to reduce inventory and make way for other displays. It's still not too late to get bulbs in the ground and enjoy some color next spring. Ideally we would like to have the bulbs in the ground by Thanksgiving, but they can still be planted as long as the soil is not frozen. Be sure to follow package directions regarding planting depth, and apply a layer of mulch over the soil surface to reducing freeze/thaw cycling. The biggest danger in planting bulbs this late is that the bulbs themselves may be of poor quality after staying on store shelves for so long. Select only firm, heavy bulbs and select against any that feel light, shriveled, or exhibit pockets of mold or rot. Adding a little bone meal to the planting hole will provide a source of slowly available nutrients to the growing bulb; however, the best time to fertilize will be in the spring once you notice new shoots arising from the soil. At that time apply a complete fertilizer, such as 10-10-10, at a rate of about 1-2 pounds per 100 square feet. 🍷



Winter Dormancy and Plant Maintenance.

Rick Durham, Consumer Horticulture Extension Specialist, University of Kentucky

So often we hear that fall or winter is a particularly good time to do certain things in the landscape. This is usually due to the fact that plants have entered into winter dormancy. Dormancy can be compared to an extended period of "rest" for plants when they are relatively inactive in terms of metabolic processes (photosynthesis, respiration, transpiration, for example). I say relatively inactive, because although these processes slow during dormancy they do not cease altogether. Most temperate perennial plants will enter dormancy in autumn as day length shortens, as temperatures (including soil temperatures) become cooler, as terminal buds are set, and perhaps as a result of drier conditions during late

summer and fall. Dormancy is the mechanism these plants use to survive the cold of winter. It is therefore important that our landscape maintenance activities not interfere with the plant's natural process of becoming dormant. Let's use pruning and fertilization practices as examples.

Fall is considered a poor time to prune most woody perennials. Why? Pruning will remove terminal buds that help to maintain dormancy in many species. The presence of the terminal bud, even in a seeming inactive state, suppresses the growth of lower buds through a process called apical dominance, a type of dormancy imposed on the lateral buds. If the apical bud is removed, this may encourage lateral buds to initiate growth if the plant has not yet fully entered a dormant state. Once lateral bud growth is initiated, dormancy will be hard to achieve, even with the advent of shortening day length and cooler temperatures. So pruning in the fall may trigger new growth that delays dormancy and predispose the plant to winter injury. The recommendation then is to prune plants in late winter, around mid February to mid March. This will also allow for evaluation and removal of any damaged limbs as a result of winter injury. Also, pruning in late winter will occur just before one of the most active times of plant growth, bud break, when the plant is redirecting stored nutrients from the root system out to the branches. This would be the most rapid time for wound (in our case the pruned surface) healing by the plant while fall would be the slowest time for wound healing. So this is why we would generally recommend pruning in late spring as opposed to fall. Some exceptions. If the limbs being removed are dead or severely damaged due to breakage, insects or disease, it is best to remove them as soon as possible at any time of the year. If the plant being pruned is spring-blooming (generally flowering before early June), it would be better from a flowering display perspective to wait until after flowering to prune since the pruning process will remove preexisting flower buds.

What about fertilization of woody plants? Fall and winter are considered the best times to apply fertilizer, but this should only be done once woody plants are fully dormant. Otherwise, applying fertilizer might trigger new growth and predispose the plant to winter injury. How does one tell if a plant is dormant? If leaves are falling, the plant has probably entered dormancy sufficiently to allow fertilization. To be doubly safe, wait until temperatures are unlikely to climb into the 70F range. In Kentucky this could occur anytime from mid October to mid November, so to be absolutely safe this probably means mid November or later. Also, get the fertilizer down before the soil has frozen (say before Christmas) else the fertilizer will remain on the soil surface and will be subject to runoff with any additional precipitation. If you don't fertilize between Thanksgiving and Christmas, wait until the ground thaws in late February or early March to apply fertilizer. However you must realize that February and March are not the best times for applying fertilizer to lawns composed of cool season

grasses (fescues, bluegrass, and perennial ryegrass). If fertilizer is being regularly applied to the lawn, woody plants growing nearby are likely getting sufficient nutrients from these applications and would likely not need additional fertilizer. 🌱



Great Gardening Books

Mary Lynn Collins
Franklin County Master Gardener

The coming months are great opportunities for gardeners to rest—and spend some time reading gardening books for information and inspiration. Here are a few recommendations—some old and some new—and all available at the Paul Sawyier Public Library.

***Gardening at the Dragon's Gate: At Work in the Wild and Cultivated World* by Wendy Johnson.** This book was just released earlier this year and while you could check it out at the library, you might want to add this one to your Christmas list. The author is a long-time organic gardener and a Buddhist meditation teacher. The book is a primer on gardening and life: “Gardening is all about picking and choosing and following your passion.”

***Secrets of a Kentucky Gardener* by Karen Angelucci.** Ms. Angelucci is a master gardener who lives in Lexington, Kentucky. What I love about this book is that it is specifically for our garden region and it is organized by the month. It is a great source to check monthly to make sure your gardening chores get done at the appropriate time.

***American Border Gardens* by Melanie Fleischmann.** This book is actually recommended by a gardening friend, Reba Pierce, and after a quick review, I can see why she checks this one out of the library on a regular basis. It includes basic plant information and beautiful pictures of border gardens. Some of the borders are on private residences; some are in gardens open to the public such as the New York Botanical Gardens. The real value of this book is the inclusion of “mapped” layouts with a complete list of plants for each border highlighted.

***Growing and Propagating Wildflowers and Native Trees, Shrubs & Vines* by William Cullina.** If you are interested in native plantings, be sure and check out both of these excellent reference books. Cullina, curator for the Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens, is a nationally recognized expert on native plants. His books are comprehensive—packed with information. 🌱

BIRD-FEEDING TIPS

Be sure to keep birds happy and healthy this winter. The following information from Cornell University, Project Feeder Watch will give some tips. Log on to <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw/AboutBirdsandFeeding/BirdFoods.htm#Tips> for more information!

- Birds may be wary of new foods. If you add something new to your bird-feeding station, offer it in a familiar place.
- If you buy a lot of seed, store it in a cool, dry place, in a rodent-proof, metal can. Check the seed often for mold. Dispose of any seed that is questionable.
- Do not feed birds any foods that contain chocolate. An ingredient of chocolate—theobromine—is toxic to birds just as it is to dogs and cats.

- Do not use seed that has been stored for an extended period of time; it may grow mold, which can contain harmful toxins.

- Birds need water for drinking and bathing, so they are attracted to water just as they are to feeders. You can purchase a bird bath or simply use dishes or shallow pans. Birds seem to prefer baths that are at ground level, but raised baths will attract birds as well. Change the water every day to keep it fresh and clean.

- If the bath is on the ground, arrange a few branches or stones in the water so that birds can stand on them and drink without getting wet (this is particularly important in winter).

- Set up your feeder in a quiet place where it is easy to see and convenient to refill. The feeder should be close to natural shelter (cover) such as trees or shrubs, which offer refuge to birds as they wait their turn to feed.

- You should clean your feeders about once every two weeks; more often during times of heavy use. For best results wash your feeder thoroughly in hot, soapy water, then soak or rinse it in a solution of one part bleach to nine parts water. Dry the feeder thoroughly before refilling.

- In most areas, black-oil sunflower seed attracts the greatest variety of birds. It has a high meat-to-shell ratio and a high fat content.

- Beware of commercial seed mixes.

They're often a blend of sunflower seeds plus a high proportion of less appealing "filler" such



as millet, oats, wheat, flax, buckwheat seeds, and red milo. These mixes can be wasteful because the birds pick out the prized sunflower seeds and leave the rest. Instead, try making your own birdseed mix. Pour about 25 pounds of black-oil sunflower seed, 10 -pounds of white proso millet, and 10 pounds of cracked corn into a clean trash can.

If you'd prefer a more natural approach or you want to satisfy more than birds' nutritional needs, consider landscaping your yard—even just a part of it—to be more bird-friendly. 🌿



A Note from Kim:

Happy Holidays to Everyone!

The Winter months are here and finds us dreaming of our spring gardens. Spend some time with paper and pencil planning next year's vegetable and flower garden. Research the best plants for your site to save some headaches from the wrong plant in the wrong place! Attend some of the great learning sessions listed in the calendar and read a good gardening book.

I hope your holidays are warm and wonderful. See you in the New Year!

Happy Gardening,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kim Cowherd". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kim



KIDZ

CORNER

GRAFTY BIRD!

SEED ORNAMENTS



These molded bird seed ornaments are a lot of fun to make, and very inexpensive. You may already have all the materials you need in your home - we were able to make gifts for all the wonderful friends in our life for around \$3.

I found this recipe at eHOW.com, and it worked great!

You'll Need:

- 3/4 cup flour
- 1/2 cup water
- 1 envelope unflavored gelatin
- 3 tbsp. corn syrup
- 4 cups birdseed
- molds (muffin tin, cookie cutters, etc.)
- nonstick spray
- drinking straw
- waxed paper
- ribbon/twin

- 1: Combine the flour, water, gelatin and corn syrup in a large mixing bowl. Stir until well-combined.
- 2: Add the birdseed to the mixture, stir until well coated.
- 3: Spray your mold(s) with cooking spray, and spoon birdseed mixture into each mold. Use the bottom of a measuring cup to pack it down, and make the top smooth. Poke a hole through top of each birdseed mold using a drinking straw, making sure it goes all the way through.
- 4: Leave the birdseed mixture in the molds for two to three hours. Then, remove the straws and lay out a sheet of waxed paper. Gently remove the hardened ornaments from the mold, and place them on the wax paper upside down. Allow them to dry for at least two to three more hours, or overnight.
- 5: Cut your ribbon and carefully put it through the hole.
- 6: Package them up!



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Congratulations to the Master Gardener Class of 2009 on completing the final requirement of the program and becoming Certified Master Gardeners. Left-Right, Bottom to Top: Brenda Gardner, Ruth Ann Ritter, Susan Harkins, Raverne McLellan, Kim Cowherd (FCCES Horticulture Agent), Jackie T. Phillips, Marcie Jeffers, Deena Strunk, Karen Hilborn Crabtree, Trish Tyler, Gil Thurman, and Gary Ritter. Absent from the photo was Phillip W. Case.



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