

Q: How do I keep my Christmas cactus blooming?

A: *Schlumbergera bridgesii*, or Christmas cactus bloom for about two weeks, but with proper care can bloom for many years. Good gardeners have been known to keep these plants thriving for over 50 years, but as with most plants it is the care that they get year-round that will determine if you are able to get repeat blooms. These popular epiphytic plants are native to the Organ Mountains in Brazil and are considered tropical cacti. In their native environment they are often found in the forks of tree limbs, rooting in composting leaves.

If you are purchasing a plant, check the branches and underside of the leaves. Avoid plants with yellow spots or purple blotches that may indicate disease problems. Check the base of the plant where it enters the soil, looking for firm, green tissue with no sign of rot. Areas with rot are soft to the touch.

The plants need to be kept in an area that receives bright light, but not direct sun, which can cause the foliage to turn red. They need consistent dark hours to set flower buds (photoperiodism); keep them in a room where evening lights are rarely used after October. These plants boom in response to the short light days of winter (or long night hours if you prefer). If you have such a place, do not move the plant once buds have set—moving will confuse it, and potentially cause the buds to abort. Keep away from fireplaces and heat vents indoors, as night-time temperature needs to stay around 13C (50-55F). The plants can be kept outside from April till September in part shade locations if the temperature remains around 21-27C (70-80F) during the day.

Although members of the cactus family, these plants do not do well if they become too dry, nor will they thrive in drought conditions. Water them thoroughly once the soil feels dry to the touch. Do not let the plants sit in water in a saucer. It is a good idea to place the plant in a sink and let the water drench the potting soil. Water again once the soil feels dry to the touch. Start to water less frequently in September when you are starting to encourage the plants to bloom. The plants prefer relatively high humidity. Placing a bowl of water with attractive stones in it nearby will allow the humidity levels to increase. You can also mist the plant several times a day.

The plant will need to be repotted periodically as it out-grows the container it is in, approximately every three years. Move up to a slightly larger container in the spring, using a commercial potting soil with good drainage characteristics and a pH of 5.5 to 6.2. They will not tolerate salts. Garden soil is not recommended as it can contain fungal and other disease pathogens that can kill your cactus. Fertilize with any basic houseplant fertilizer several times during the late spring, following the directions on the box.