

# Down the Garden Path

December 23, 1997 Plant & Pest Diagnostic Laboratory Number 124



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## HOME

### Care of Christmas Cactus Important After the Holidays

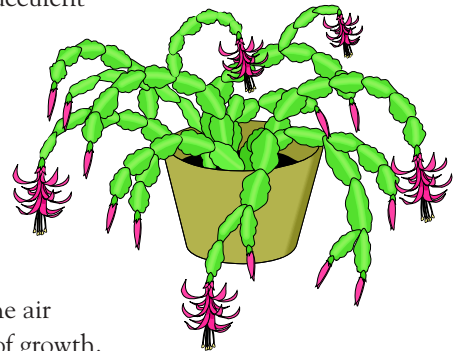
*B. Rosie Lerner, Extension Consumer Horticulturist*

While the poinsettia remains the most popular of the holiday plants, a healthy Christmas cactus in full bloom is a great gift idea for that special gardener. But along with that bounty of blooms, send along these tips for keeping the plant looking its best.

While the Christmas cactus can adapt to low light, more abundant blooms are produced on plants that have been exposed to high light intensity. Keep your plants in a sunny location indoors.

Most blooming plants will keep their blossoms longer in cooler temperatures. Keep the plant in a well-lit location, but away from drafts, from heat vents, fireplace, or other sources of hot air.

Watering seems to be the source of most problems with the Christmas cactus. The plant is not a true cactus and is not quite as drought tolerant as the name infers. However, it is a succulent plant and can store a reasonable quantity of water in the leaves. Water thoroughly when the top half of the soil in the pot feels dry to the touch. Discard the excess water and then do not water again until the top half becomes dry. The length of time between waterings will vary with the air temperature, amount of light, rate of growth, and relative humidity.



Well-drained soil is a must for Christmas cactus. Use a commercially packaged potting mix for succulent plants or mix your own by combining two parts plain potting soil with one part clean sand or vermiculite.

After the blossoms fade, the plant isn't much to look at. But a little extra care will help bring the plant back to full bloom next year. Pruning your Christmas cactus after blooming has quit will encourage the plant to branch out. Remove a few sections of each stem by pinching with your fingers or cutting with a sharp knife. These sections can be rooted in moist vermiculite to propagate new plants.



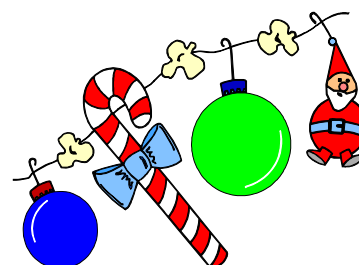
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Plants can be moved outdoors in summer, but keep them in a shady or semi-shady location. Too much direct sun-light can burn the leaves. When it is time to bring the plants back inside in fall, slowly adjust the plants to life indoors by gradually increasing the number of hours they spend indoors each day.

Christmas cactus can be forced to bloom again next year if given long uninterrupted dark periods. Begin the dark treatments about mid-October to have plants in full bloom by the holidays. Christmas cactus will also bloom if they are subjected to cool temperatures of about 50-55 degrees Fahrenheit at night. Plants will be ready for the holidays if the cool treatments are started by early November. ☺



## TIME TO RENEW

It is that time of year....holidays, shopping, parties, and subscription renewal. Your 1997 subscription to *Down the Garden Path* will end with this issue. Avoid a delay in your subscription.

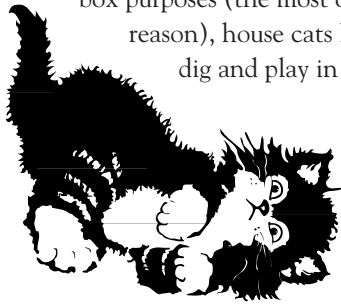
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## OVER THE BACK FENCE

**Q:** I have recently provided a home for a couple of cats. How do I keep them out of my house plants? I have tried rocks in some of my larger pots, but they seem to like the little ones as well. Your help will be greatly appreciated.

**A:** House plants provide a wonderful play ground/toy for house cats. The plants themselves, as well as the potting soil, are irresistible attractions for bored cats. Some house plants are toxic to cats, so make sure you have only non-toxic varieties within the reach of your pets. Cats really seem to love to get their toes into soil. Even when not used for litter box purposes (the most obvious reason), house cats like to dig and play in dirt.



The rock "mulch" in your plant pots is a good deterrent for digging in the soil. You can enhance the effectiveness of your rock mulch by first cutting a circle of screen wire or weed fabric the same diameter as your pot. Cut an X or hole/slit for your plant to fit through. Then cover the screen barrier with rock, crushed marble, or pea gravel. This is a pretty effective barrier for digging, but it may not curb destruction of plant materials. There are several spray repellent products available to keep cats away from plants and other items. Pet stores will have a selection of these products or check with your personal veterinarian for a specific recommendation. If your cats are very determined, you may have to make your plants inaccessible by putting them in hanging baskets or by displaying your plants in rooms that are off-limits to your cats.

-- Judy S. Loven ☺

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