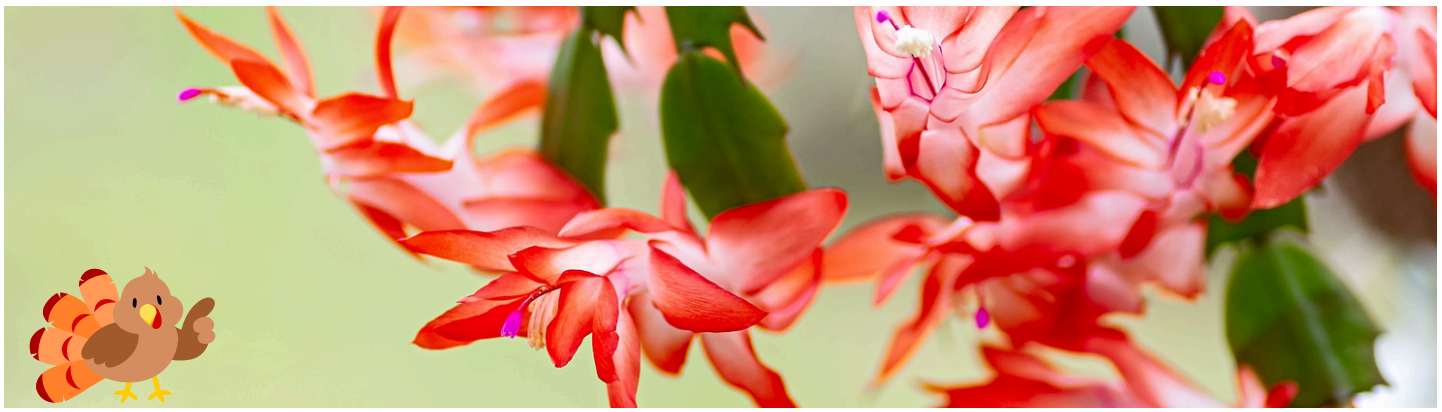
NOVEMBER

Horticulture Newsletter

2025

Cooperative Extension Service



Christmas or Thanksgiving Cactus

Written by : Lia Beddingfield; N.C. Cooperative Extension,Henderson County Center

Do you have a Christmas cactus that seems to bloom early each year, and you wonder what you've done wrong? It could be that Thanksgiving is in fact the right time for your plant to flower. The sharp-toothed edges of this plant suggest it is a Thanksgiving cactus, a species of its own.
A Christmas cactus is one of three popular holiday cacti: Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Thanksgiving cacti typically start in late fall and Christmas cacti, around a month later. An Easter cactus often starts producing flower buds after the height of winter.

Thanksgiving cacti are often sold as "Christmas cacti," and these two holiday plants look very similar. In fact, the Thanksgiving species was a parent of the hybrid Christmas plant. Commercial growers can treat both types to bloom at a prescribed time for holiday sales. Both fall in the genus Schlumbergera, have the same color scheme and require the same care. There are two main differences between a Christmas and Thanksgiving cactus: the flowering season and the segments of the leaves. True Christmas cacti (S. xbuckleyi) have smooth, round leaf edges while Thanksgiving cacti (S. truncata) have jagged leaf edges.

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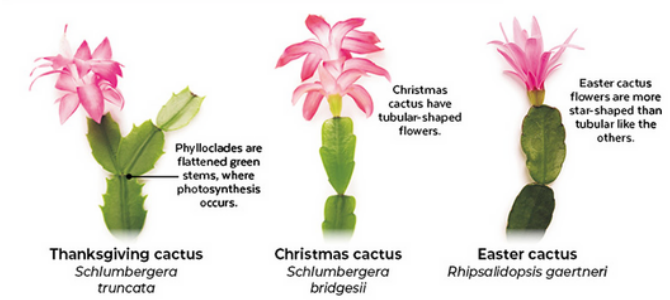
If your plant possesses the telltale rounded leaves of the Christmas cactus yet insists on blooming earlier in the fall, it's likely due to its growing conditions. Both Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti need cool temperatures to spur flower buds. Night temperatures between 55 and 60 degrees (F) are ideal. Flowering is also best with longer periods of total darkness, around 13 to 16 hours each night. Flowering should follow about eight weeks of this treatment. The earlier the onset of cool conditions and long nights, the sooner the plant will flower. Try keeping your plant in a warm, well-lit spot, such as a room you use throughout the evening, for longer into the fall if you'd like it to bloom later in the season.

Thanksgiving cactus (Schlumbergera truncata) and Christmas cactus (Schlumbergera x xbuckleyi) are popular, fall- and winter-flowering houseplants native to Brazil, and are available in a wide variety of colors including red, rose, purple, lavender, peach, orange, cream, and white. These Schlumbergera species grow as epiphytes among tree branches in shady rainforests, and their pendulous stems make them a great choice for hanging baskets.

IDENTIFYING HOLIDAY CACTI



When grown under normal night length conditions, Thanksgiving cacti normally flower near Thanksgiving approximately a month before Christmas cacti bloom. Another member of the group sold as holiday cacti is the Easter cactus (Hatiora gaertneri; synonym Rhipsalidopsis gaertneri), which flowers primarily in the spring and sporadically throughout the year with pink or red flowers. Because of its bloom time, the Thanksgiving cactus is most predominately encountered for sale during the winter holiday season. Flowering can last up 7 to 8 weeks if the plants are kept at 68 °F.

To distinguish between the Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti, look at the shape of the flattened stem segments, which are botanically called phylloclades. On the Thanksgiving cactus, these stem segments each have 2 to 4 saw-toothed serrations or projections along the margins. The stem margins on the Christmas cactus are more rounded. Note that there are no true leaves on either of these holiday cacti, so photosynthesis occurs within the green phylloclade.

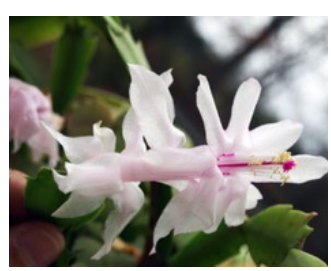
A second method to distinguish between these two Schlumbergera species is based on the color of the pollen-bearing anthers. The anthers of the Thanksgiving cactus are yellow, whereas the anthers on the Christmas cactus are purplish brown.

Light & Temperature: *The holiday cacti grow best in light shade. Full sunlight is beneficial during fall and winter, but bright sun during the summer months can make plants look pale and yellow. Ideal spring and summer growth occurs at temperatures between 70 to 80 °F during its growing season from April to September.*

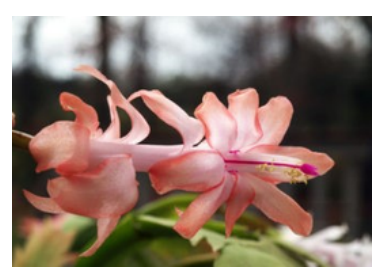
During the fall, the Thanksgiving and Christmas cacti depend upon shorter day lengths (8 to 10 hours) and cooler temperatures to set their flower buds. Do not let temperatures rise above 90 °F once the flower buds are set in the fall. Continuous warm temperatures can cause flower buds to drop. Do not leave these cacti outside if temperatures will drop below 50 °F.

The secret of good flower bud production during the fall involves temperature regulation and photoperiod (length of day and night) control. To initiate flower buds the plants, need:

- *Bright light.*
- *Long nights. Fourteen hours or more of continuous darkness each day is required before flower bud set will occur. Long nights should be started about the middle of September and continued for at least 6 continuous weeks for complete bud set. Note that as little as 2 hours of interrupted lighting will inhibit flower bud set.*
- *Buds normally will be visible in 3 to 4 weeks. The photoperiod has no effect on flowering once the buds are set.*
- *Fall growing temperatures should be kept between 60 and 68 °F, but as close to 68 °F as possible for maximum flower production. Plants grown with night temperatures between 50 and 59 °F will set flower buds regardless of day length, but growth will be slower and bud drop may occur at 50 °F.*
- *Pinching back the stems in early June to promote branching and more terminals for more flowers.*
- *Pinching (also called leveling) at the end of September to remove any terminal phylloclade that are less than 1 cm (0.4 inch) long and to make all stems approximately the same length. These short and immature stem segments will not initiate flower buds until they mature. After a short phylloclade is removed, a flower bud forms on the previous, more mature stem segment.*



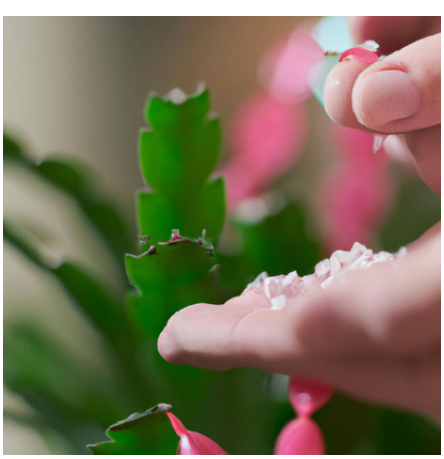
Thanksgiving cactus with pale pink blossom



Thanksgiving cactus with peach-colored blossom

Watering & Fertilizer: *Water the growing medium when it is dry to the touch. The holiday cacti are tolerant of dry, slightly under-watered conditions during the spring and summer. Do not let the soil become waterlogged, especially during the dark days of winter, but do not let the soil completely dry out either. However, following bud set in the fall, the growing medium must be kept evenly moist to prevent flower bud drop. Never let water stand in the saucer beneath the pot.*

Fertilize plants monthly from the time new growth starts in late winter or early spring, and throughout the summer using a one-half strength soluble fertilizer, such as a 20-10-20 or 20-20-20 with trace elements. Holiday cacti have a higher requirement for magnesium than many plants. Fertilize monthly during the growing season with Epsom salts (magnesium sulfate) mixed at 1 teaspoon per gallon of water, but do not apply the same week as the regular fertilizer. Stop fertilization during the late summer for greater flower bud production in the fall.



Growing Media: *The holiday cacti flower best when kept somewhat pot-bound. Repotting is necessary only about once every three years and is best done in the spring. The potting medium must be well-drained with good aeration, as these epiphytic cacti do not grow well in heavy, wet potting mixes. A good mix may contain 60-80% potting soil with 40-20% perlite. Choose a good brand of potting soil that is pH balanced.*

Propagation: *Holiday cacti are easy to propagate by cuttings, which are taken in May or June. Pinch off sections of stems with 3 to 5 phylloclade (stem segments) on each. Allow the cut ends of the sections to callus by placing them outdoors in the shade for a day or two. Choose a well-drained potting soil and new or disinfected containers for rooting. Place three cuttings at approximately one inch deep into the potting soil of a 4-inch container or use 5 cuttings in a 6-inch container. Water the soil well and cover the plants and rooting container with a clear plastic bag secured with a rubber band around the container. The plastic bag will act as a miniature greenhouse to keep the relative humidity at 100% to enhance rooting. Place the container in bright, indirect light until roots have formed in three to eight weeks. At this time the plastic bag can be removed, and a dilute fertilizer solution can be used at watering.*

Creating a Cozy Garden and Landscape: Fall Chores That Will Lead to Spring Success

Source: Rick Durham, Department of Horticulture extension professor

As autumn settles in and temperatures begin to drop, it's time to prepare your garden for winter. Fall offers an ideal window to protect your landscape and lay the groundwork for a thriving spring. Here's a streamlined guide to help you get started.

Begin by clearing away fallen leaves, twigs, and plant debris. These materials can harbor pests and diseases, so remove and compost healthy matter while discarding anything that is infected. While most pruning of trees and shrubs should be left until late winter or early spring, fall is suitable for pruning dead or damaged branches. Remove any limbs that pose a risk during winter storms.

Soil preparation is also key. Incorporate compost or organic matter to improve structure and fertility. Consider testing your soil's pH and nutrient levels to guide amendments for optimal spring growth.
Fall is the best time to fertilize cool-season grasses like fescue and Kentucky bluegrass. Apply nitrogen in two or three doses spaced six weeks apart. Woody plants benefit from late-season feeding as long as soils are not frozen. Wait until the leaves on deciduous plants are turning colors to apply fertilizer to ensure proper hardening.

If you are looking to spruce up your landscaping, fall is an ideal time to establish perennials, shrubs, and trees. Spring-flowering bulbs can be planted between mid-October and Thanksgiving.

Next, apply mulch to insulate your soil and tree roots. A two- to three-inch layer of organic material — such as wood chips, straw or ground leaves — helps regulate temperature, retain moisture and suppress weeds.

While mulching, assess frost-sensitive plants. Cover tender annuals and tropicals with frost cloth or burlap on cold nights and move potted plants to sheltered areas to prolong growth and flowering for a few days. Watering before a freeze can help, as moist soil retains heat better than dry soil.

Finally, consider wildlife as you winterize. Leave seed heads for birds, create brush piles for small mammals, and install feeders. Piles of fallen leaves may also provide overwintering sites for butterflies, their larvae or other beneficial insects. Berry-producing shrubs and ornamental grasses add seasonal interest while supporting local ecosystems.

By completing these essential tasks, you'll safeguard your garden through winter and ensure a vibrant return in spring.

To learn more about fall garden and yard landscaping care, contact the McCracken County Extension office.

Forest Management Plans: A Roadmap to a Healthier Woodland

Source: Jacob Muller, assistant professor and extension forestry specialist

If you own woodland, you already know it's more than just trees — it's a living, breathing ecosystem full of potential. Whether your goals include timber production, wildlife habitat, recreation, or conservation, a Forest Management Plan is your most effective tool for bringing your vision to life.

Think of a Forest Management Plan as a roadmap. It outlines your long-term goals for your land and lays out the steps to achieve them. It helps you understand what resources you have, what your land is capable of producing and how to manage it sustainably. From hunting and hiking to timber harvesting and habitat restoration, your plan can be tailored to fit your unique objectives.

Creating a plan isn't a one-time event — it's a process. Here are 10 key steps to developing and implementing a woodland management plan:

1. Identify goals and objectives. What do you want from your woodland?
2. Conduct an inventory. Assess tree species, soil, water, and forest health.
3. Revisit objectives. Adjust based on what your land can realistically support.
4. Record area details. Map and document conditions by stand.
5. Designate management areas. Divide your land into zones based on use.
6. Select practices and schedule activities. Choose actions like thinning or planting.
7. Implement practices. Put your plan into action.
8. Keep records and evaluate. Track progress and forest response.
9. Refine as needed. Update your plan based on results and changing goals.
10. Enjoy Your Woodland! Spend time in it to better understand how it responds.

If developing a plan seems daunting, the good news is that you don't have to do it alone. In fact, a professional forester or natural resource manager is the best resource available to you to help you articulate your goals, assess your land's potential, and design a realistic, achievable plan. They'll also help you navigate challenges like invasive species, disease and access issues.

Costs may vary significantly depending on the size of your woodland and the complexity of your goals. Hiring a consulting forester to develop a plan may be beneficial, as it affords you, the landowner, some flexibility and ensures that someone visits your property in a timely manner. However, many state agencies, such as the Kentucky Division of Forestry, offer this service to landowners at no cost to them. One potential downside is that you may have to wait for a forester to become available to assist you in managing your woodlands.
Regardless of whom you work with, when it comes to implementing your plan, many state and federal programs offer financial assistance — and some even require a written plan to qualify. In Kentucky, for example, the Forest Stewardship Program offers technical and financial support to landowners who commit to sustainable management.

A Forest Management Plan isn't just a document — it's a commitment to your land's future. Whether you're managing 10 acres or 1,000, taking the time to plan today will pay off for decades to come.
Contact the McCracken County Extension office for more information.

Cooperative Extension Service

2026 HORTICULTURE PROGRAMS

5:00 - 6:00 P.M.

McCracken Co Extension Service
2025 New Holt Rd Paducah, KY 42001
(270) 554-9520

Jan 6	Soils & Natural Repellants in the Garden
Feb 3	Wildlife Around the Home
Mar 3	Organic Companion Gardening with Stay Family Farms

Please register for each program online at
https://ukymccracken.pacecommunity.net/

SCAN HERE

Cooperative Extension Service

Agriculture and Natural Resources
Family and Consumer Sciences
4-H Youth Development
Community and Economic Development

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Lexington, KY 40506

Disabilities accommodated with prior notification.

To register for events at our office, scan the QR code below

FREE SOIL SAMPLES FOR MCCRACKEN COUNTY RESIDENTS

Did you know, as a McCracken County resident, you can get up to 5 soil samples sent to the lab for FREE each year? We offer multiple soil sampling packages for yards, pastures, row crops, gardens, wildlife plots, etc. If you're interested in more information, come to the office or call 270-554-9520.

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