

# Differences in holiday cacti

**Q**uestion: Is there really a difference between Thanksgiving cacti, Christmas cacti, and Easter cacti, or is it just a marketing ploy?



**Janet Bitter**  
Master Gardener

**Answer:** There are indeed three distinct types of holiday cacti, which are distinguished by their bloom times and by the shape of their leaves.

Thanksgiving cactus *Schlumbergera truncata*, Christmas cactus *Schlumbergera bridgesii*, and Easter cactus *Schlumbergera gaertneri* (also called *Hatiora gaertneri*) are all hybrids and have been popular holiday gifts since the 1800s.

These three cacti originate from the coastal mountains of southeastern Brazil at altitudes ranging from 3,000 to 5,000 feet. They were probably introduced to Europe from Rio de Janeiro sometime in the 18th century.

Rio, which sits on the shore of Guanabara Bay, is the most important port in South America, and most sailing vessels stopped there as they made their way around the Horn or back to Europe.

These three holiday cacti are classified as epiphytic cacti. Epiphytic plants are any plant that grows on another plant or object merely for physical support. They have no attachment to the ground or any other obvious nutrient source and are not parasitic on the supporting plants. They get nutrients from leaves and other debris material.

These three holiday plants are true cacti and belong to the Cactaceae family; however, they do not resemble the cactus that grows in arid areas in the western United States.

Instead these plants are fleshy, green, segmented plants that, over time, develop woody, thick stems. These segments are usually called cladodes (also called cladophylls). Each segment looks like a leaf but is flat for increasing the surface area, thick for storing water and green for photosynthesis.

Flowers develop from the tips of the last cladode of each segmented arm. Traditionally speaking, the flowers would be pink, scarlet and magenta, but nowadays, due to hybridization, you can find holiday cacti with blooms of white, yellow, orange, apricot, salmon and purple.

Thanksgiving cactus and Christmas cactus are popular because they are fairly easy to grow and easy to find at garden centers. The Easter cactus is the most difficult of the three to grow and not as readily available to purchase.

When any of the three are in bloom, the flowers are beautiful and exotic looking. For all three of these cacti, blooms will last between one to two weeks. If the conditions are just right, the beautiful blooms may last up to eight weeks.

In the Northern Hemisphere, they will bloom around the season that they are named after. Since their stems hang down, they are the perfect plant for hanging baskets. For most people in the U.S., these plants are grown indoors.

Okay, so now to answer your question about the differences.

The Thanksgiving cactus has stem segments with pointed teeth. They are also known as the crab cactus, the claw cactus or the lobster cactus because of their claw-like segments where the edges are hooked.

The flowers are asymmetrical and they grow horizontally from the stem segments. The upper side of the flower is shaped differently than the lower side. The Thanksgiving cactus generally blooms earlier than the other two holiday cacti.

The Christmas cactus has stem segments with rounded, teardrop-shaped scallops, with more symmetrical teeth. Christmas cactus segments are smaller than Thanksgiving cactus segments, and they also have smoother edges.



PHOTO BY ELIAS ROVIELO VIA FLICKER

Flowering Thanksgiving cacti typically bloom in the mid to late-fall.

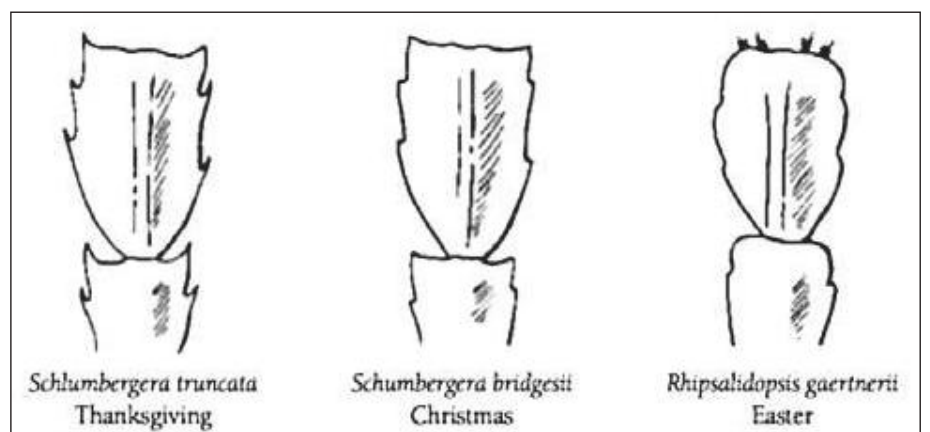
The flowers are symmetrical and are evenly distributed around the flower tubes. I'd like to give you just a word of warning about buying a "Christmas cactus".

Many times a garden center will label a plant "Christmas cactus" when indeed it is actually a Thanksgiving cactus. This happens because retailers prefer a plant that actually blooms before the actual Christmas holiday; therefore, there is a tendency to label a Thanksgiving cactus incorrectly.

The Easter cactus is very similar in appearance to the Christmas cactus except that its stem segments are rounder at the tips and have soft, brownish bristles.

Flowers are more star-shaped than the other cacti. The flowers are considerably brighter than the other two types of cacti flowers. Easter cactus is not as popular or as readily available as the other two because they take too long to produce.

Regardless of which variety of holiday cacti you



COURTESY PHOTO

The leaf structures of the three varieties of holiday cacti

own, they make a very beautiful addition to your collection of houseplants.

*Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu) or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*