
KINGMAN IS GROWING! Column

The Thanksgiving cactus or crab cactus

by **Charlee Ware**, Kingman Area Master Gardener

With a bit of trickery, these popular holiday houseplants are easy to grow, to propagate, and to come to flower each winter.

The first trick is to avoid extreme heat and cold changes.

When bringing the blooming plant home, cover the plant with a couple of grocery bags or a sweater while carrying to your car or into the house. Avoid placing your new plant in cold or hot drafts. If stress happens, it won't kill the plant, but the existing flowers and buds will fall off. This plant blooms for two to four months each winter, so once settled into its new home, it should begin setting on new flower buds.

Known as a Zygocactus, these are true cacti and have fine spines where the leaf/stem sections are joined. Their name is taken from the shape of their flattened stem joints; Zygos being the Greek word for yoke, as in oxen. Native to the rain forests of Brazil, they are tropical plants not desert cacti.

Most 'Christmas Cactus' sold are really the Thanksgiving cactus or crab cactus, *Schlumbergera truncate*. For obvious marketing reasons, it is the variety of choice for nurseries supplying blooming plants for our winter holidays. It blooms earlier in the season—ready for our

Thanksgiving holiday, and continues to bloom through January. Flowers range from yellow, salmon, fuchsia, and white or combinations of these colors.

You can tell whether you have a Thanksgiving or a Christmas Cactus by looking at the ends of the stem sections. The crab or Thanksgiving cactus sections end in points or claws. The true Christmas cactus has rounded lobes.

The second trick is not to drown your plant.

Even though this is a tropical plant, its roots are often in the air or in loose decaying plant matter. Its roots need plenty of air, so a soggy pot is unhealthy. Water, let the pot drain, then don't water again until the top half-inch of soil is dry.

The third trick, is propagation.

This can be done anytime of the year, but the most prolific time for growing roots and new growth, is in the Spring. Since you may also be trimming some old growth at that time, you'll have cuttings to propagate. See the sidebar, for a year in the life of your Thanksgiving cactus.

A couple of years ago, I had the opportunity for a propagation experiment. If you want to try it, here are the steps to take:

- Using a clean knife or pruners, trim off the top portion of the stems into segments (called phylloclades), and let them callus for a few days. For any pruning jobs, it is always best to clean or sterilize pruner blades between cuts. Dip the blades into rubbing alcohol (best) or use a 1-10 part water and chlorine bleach solution (may rust your pruners, so rinse and oil after use).
- My experiment showed that while a two leaf section, certainly rooted and made new growth, the "Y" cut sections – those with two branches developed many more roots and top growth. In addition, if planted two sections deep, both sections rooted at their base.

- Dip each segment into a rooting hormone. Any brand will do, whether powder or liquid. To avoid contaminating the container, place a small amount into a baggie.
- The cuttings can now be planted into screened & sterile wash sand. Builder's sand can also be used. To sterilize, dampen the sand slightly, and microwave until steaming. Let cool to room temperature. Plant the segments up to the bottom of the yoke into the sand.
- Water thoroughly and then once a week.
- Keep in a well-lit room, but out of direct sunlight.
- Unearth a couple in about a month to check for roots. When roots begin showing, give the entire group of cuttings a watering with a very weak solution of a high-phosphorus fertilizer (that's the middle number).
- Let grow another month or so, and repot into its new home. You can plant a 4-inch pot with 3 or 4 segments. Since these are acid loving plants, a good potting mix with good drainage would be : 1 part peat moss; 1 part regular potting soil, and 1 part sand or pumice.

The forth trick, really is a trick.

Thanksgiving cactus is a short-day plant. To encourage annual blooming, you need to imitate the shortening, cooler, and dryer days of autumn. You can also use this same method on Poinsettia plants. In September or October, you need to:

- reduce daylight hours for 20 to 25 days. This can be done by placing the plant in a night-time dark garage, or unused room. Or use a cardboard box, or brown paper bag to cover the plant from 6pm to 8am. Do not leave in the dark for 24 hours a day. Yes, it will happen once or twice, but that's okay—similar to a very cloudy day maybe?
- reduce watering to a minimum, and keep in the coolest room in your home—ideal is 55 to 65 degrees F.
- when flower buds begin forming, increase water and place in a prominent location for enjoyment.

These cacti are protected by patents, which means you can propagate them for your own enjoyment, and you can give them away, but you cannot sell them. If you are interested in how these are produced commercially, see this web site at Auburn University

<http://www.ag.auburn.edu/hort/landscape/Hcactus.htm>

A year in the life of your
Thanksgiving Cactus

–November thru January -

Flowering. Water normally. Keep temperatures above 55 degrees F.

–February thru March – Resting.

Give infrequent water and no fertilizer).

–April thru June – Growing. Pinch back.

Water when potting mix begins to dry out.

Fertilize once monthly to encourage new growth, stopping one month before shortening days. Keep indoors with some sunlight

–September thru October –

Preparing to flower.

Reduce daylight hours for at least 20-25 days.

Keep on the dry side and cool (55 to 65 degrees F) until flower buds form.

Then increase water and temperature, and return to living space.

For more information contact The University of Arizona Mohave County Cooperative Extension at 101 E. Beale Street, Suite A, Kingman or telephone 928-753-3788.

CONTACT: ROB GRUMBLES
Extension Agent, Agriculture
The University of Arizona
Mohave County Cooperative Extension
101 E Beale Street, Suite A
Kingman AZ 86401-5808
mohavece@cals.arizona.edu

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, James A. Christenson, Director, Cooperative Extension, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences, The University of Arizona. The University of Arizona is an equal opportunity, affirmative action institution. The University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, veteran status, or sexual orientation in its programs and activities.