



Trowel Talk!

December, 2011

Christmas cacti add seasonal flair!

Forest cacti are native to Central and South America. There these atypical cacti easily take root in the fallen vegetation that collects in the crotches of jungle trees. They find sufficient nourishment to support what can at times become enormous plants compared to those that we grow in our homes.

Grown as houseplants forest cacti can often prove hard to get to bloom because three requirements need to be met. 1) They perform better if they spend time outdoors during summer. 2) They need a cool, dry rest period after the summer. 3) They should not be moved once they begin to bud.



Schlumbergera buckleyi

Typical of the species are their leaf-like stems and their trailing growth habit, they are excellent plants for hanging baskets.

Probably the forest cacti that are most familiar to us are the Christ-

mas cacti (*Schlumbergera* hybrids). Mother and most of her friends grew these. Many growing tips were shared back and forth during canasta, bridge, crib and euchre games. Christmas cacti appeal to us because they bloom in winter through the Christmas season. Part of the secret of getting them to perform on cue is to stop watering them during the month of October. Prior to October they can be kept outside but away from direct sun, until the first frost. Inside or out during summer, which is their growing season, they need to be kept moist and well fertilized.

Their tubular flowers come in white, orange, pink, red and purple and are borne in clusters at the ends of their leafless, flat and jointed stems, each segment of which may have points but not usually spines. The flower clusters can be 5 to 7 cm in diameter. Eventually some small, red, pear-shaped fruits may appear, about 1.5cm across. This show continues from November to January, sometimes longer. Plants need another rest at the end of the flowering period, from February to April. During rest periods little moisture is required and definitely no fertilizer.



Rhipsalidopsis sp.

Propagation can be done by seed or by cuttings. To do cuttings, remove a two- or three-segment piece of stem. After several days when the cut wounds are dry insert your cuttings upright into a potting mix. They should root in three weeks or so. After that, treat them like an estab-

lished cactus. Christmas cacti can reach a height of 30 to 45 cm with a similar sized spread.

Another impressive bloomer is the Easter cactus (*Rhipsalidopsis*). It differs in several ways from Christmas cactus. Besides blooming in spring, it has a more upright form, droopier flowers, stem segments that are more oval and its flower petals point straight out rather than curling back. Blossoms are borne not only at the tips of stems but also at their joints. Although it blooms mainly in April and May, it will occasionally bloom again in September. Aside from timing, its growth requirements are similar to those of the Christmas cactus. It requires a longish resting period from October to March.



Epiphyllum ackermanii

Last but definitely not least is the orchid cactus (*Epiphyllum ackermanii*) also called the pond lily cactus. This beauty grows 60 to 80 cm and usually flops, so staking is required, especially once it begins to produce its saucer-sized, trumpet-like blossoms. These magnificent blooms which appear along the stems come in many colours and probably one of the nicest is a yellow and white version which is also scented. Its stems are long, flat, smooth, and notched at the edges, and they can be spined or spineless.

These seasonal beauties are well worth adding to your indoor plant-scape!

Edythe Falconer
Master Gardener

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Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton

Where to find us this month for free gardening advice!

ONGOING:

Telephone Help Line: 613-236-0034

- Wednesday and Thursday 1-3 pm (all year)

E-mail Help Line: mgoc_helpline@yahoo.ca

- monitored daily
- send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID

CLINICS:

No advice clinics until Spring 2012

SPEAKING EVENTS & WORKSHOPS:

Climbers, creepers and trailers – January 3, 2012 – 7:00 p.m.

Mary Reid, Master Gardener
Old Town Hall, March Road, Kanata, Ontario
Hosted by the Kanata March Horticultural Society (guests welcome)

The Edible Landscape: Dessert Course – Small Fruit Trees For You and Me –

January 19, 2012 – 7:00 p.m.
Edythe Falconer, Master Gardener
City View United Church, 6 Epworth Avenue, Nepean, Ontario
Hosted by the Nepean Horticultural Society (guests welcome)



For information on arranging a lecture for your group: speakers@mgottawa.mgoi.ca

For more information on Master Gardeners, visit our website:

<http://mgottawa.mgoi.ca>

December TO DO List

- Leave your Christmas wish-list of wonderful yard tools, bird feeders, and garden ornaments in a conspicuous place.
- Start planning your garden for next season by browsing through the seed catalogues.
- Check houseplants for bugs every time you water. Put any infested plants in quarantine and start a spraying regime with insecticidal soap every 7-10 days.
- If you have a gardening or plant identification question, ask a Master Gardener (contact information to the right).

Tip of the Month:

Do it Yourself Seasonal Swag

Making a festive swag to welcome guests to your home is easy and fun.

Prune some evergreen boughs such as pine, spruce, fir, hemlock or cedar. You can use a single type or mix different greens together for a variety of texture.

When pruning, be careful to reach in and make a cut above a branching junction. This is the best way to hide the cut and have the tree's new growth look natural. Make sure you don't take all the boughs from one spot, move around so that no obvious "holes" are left in the tree. And finally, please don't prune from trees that don't belong to you or without permission. The poor pine tree down the road is looking a little bedraggled right now from several drive-by prunings of its lower branches.



The arrow shows where a cut could be made to minimize the impact on the tree's appearance

Determine the overall length of your swag. Trim a bough to that length and then add more boughs graduating the length to the shortest on top. While you are adding boughs, don't just pile them in the centre, alternate from side to side to centre so that you are adding fullness to the bottom of the swag.



Tying the boughs together with wire

Gather the stems tightly together close to the top of the swag and secure them with wire. Leave a wire loop at the back for hanging.

Using fine wire, you can attach pine cones to some of the branches or add purchased ornaments. Branches of berries, seedheads, or dried flowers

can also be worked in to the swag as you are building layers.



The completed swag hung on the front door

Add a decorative bow and your swag is complete. When hung outdoors the fresh boughs should hold their needles for around 5 weeks.