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## Fairchild’s tropical garden column: What to do with holiday rescue plants

BY KENNETH SETZER - FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN  
01/02/2015 7:01 PM | Updated: 01/03/2015 12:01 AM



Christmas cactus will survive well beyond holidays. KENNETH SETZER / FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN

StoryComments

Now is the time for you to swoop in and rescue some of the sad-looking plants that no one bought at the hardware store. Holiday gift plants can provide you with beauty long past the winter celebrations, and you can get them now at bargain prices.

Here are some I recommend you take home:

You will encounter dozens of forlorn-looking plants, many in foil-wrapped pots or even worse — sprayed with glitter. I bet you'll nearly trip over the unbought “mini Christmas trees” littering the ground. They are likely Cook pines (*Araucaria columnaris*) or Norfolk pines (*A. heterophylla*). These are in the *Araucaria* genus; they are not pine trees at all, but like pines, they are conifers.

These little plants can grow to more than 100 feet tall in their native habitats of New Caledonia and Norfolk Island, respectively. Araucarians are of an ancient lineage, now naturally found in the Southern Hemisphere, and include the “living fossil” Wollemi pine.

Before you rescue one of these, keep in mind they quickly grow extremely tall and are forbidden by some municipalities and homeowners’ associations. Growing one in a pot is an option, but you might one day need to come to terms with a plant too big to keep potted.

The term Christmas cactus is applied to so many different plants! Many are actually cacti; some are not. *Schlumbergera* is a genus of cactus, and a common one you will find in stores. There are multiple cultivars, hybrids, varieties or whatever the grower wants to call them, but the *Schlumbergera* offered as holiday plants characteristically have flattened, pad-shaped, segmented stems.

The younger plants grow upright and look great in a pot, and as they grow will flow out and down pendulously. They are naturally epiphytes, so make ideal hanging plants. I encourage you to grow some in hanging coconut coir pots, which drain well and are renewable.

Unlike what you may envision for cacti, these grow naturally in cool, humid areas of southeastern coastal Brazil. Too much light will turn the stems reddish, while too little inhibits flowering. I find covered patios a perfect area for hanging *Schlumbergera*. Dozens of cultivars can be found and will flower in white, pink, yellow, orange, red, crimson, magenta or purple — basically the entire crayon box, with the yellow flower being a more recent creation.

They do seem to like more fertile soil than many typical desert cacti, but the soil still needs to drain well and not clump.

Hummingbirds are their natural pollinators (witness the long flowers), but you can easily propagate them with a cutting of a few segments. Allow the severed end of the cutting to dry and form a callus before placing into potting mix.

*Schlumbergera* are said to need about 14 hours of darkness to flower, which we nearly get in South Florida in winter, but our warmer winter temps might be responsible for the profusion of blooms that these cacti invariably supply.

Another gift plant is the bromeliad. Any of these on sale is a good bet — bromeliads are tough and easily survive even my benign neglect approach to gardening. What’s odd is they are most marketable when blooming, but right after flowering, bromeliads begin to die. However, they first will likely produce numerous pups from their roots, similar to sending up suckers. When the pups are about half as large as the mother, you can carefully pull them off and plant them elsewhere.

I leave you with one final post-holiday plant, *Euphorbia*. These are often mistaken for cacti, since some may have spines, but euphorbias are succulents in a different family along with poinsettias. The one to look for is often called “cristate, crested” or “brain coral.” These indeed look like coral, or the undulations of a brain. The formation is said to be fasciated, a flattened deformity found in many plants.

The *Euphorbia*’s abnormal growth has been cultivated and is actually the plant’s selling point. These are quite beautiful. Don’t worry about the deformity; it’s harmless and won’t spread to other plants. In fact, I search for fasciated plants because they are so striking.

Most crested *Euphorbias* are grafted onto a base plant, supposedly to prolong the life of the crested part. I have no idea why these are associated with holidays. In Fairchild’s Lougheed Spiny Forest of Madagascar exhibit, you can view a dramatically fasciated *Pachypodium* (*Pachypodium lamerei* ‘Cristata’) in Plot 31, but this one’s not for sale.

Kenneth Setzer is writer and editor at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden.

### TURN YOUR TREE INTO MULCH

While we’re on the subject of thinking green at Christmas: If you have a real tree sitting in your living room that you need to get rid of soon, a nice way to reduce the burden on landfills and increase your garden’s fertility is to recycle the tree as mulch.

I haul mine into the backyard and, using hand clippers, cut up the smaller branches into the smallest pieces I can manage without losing my mind. Then I spread them over open areas where they will decompose into the soil and keep down weeds. I also spread the finer needles at the base of plants preferring a more acidic soil. It smells good, looks nice and nourishes your plants. We all win.

Of course adding smaller branches and needles to a compost pile is also a nice idea. Now you can discard the trunk, or cut it up (careful — it gets sappy) and let it decompose in your yard and serve as home for countless critters.

If you don’t want to turn your tree into mulch yourself, you can drop it off at certain Miami-Dade or Broward locations.

• **Miami-Dade residents** who receive curbside waste collection service from the county can take Christmas trees to a Trash and Recycling Center. The centers are open daily from 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. A list of dropoff locations is at this site: [www.miamidade.gov/publicworks/](http://www.miamidade.gov/publicworks/). Mulch will be available beginning in mid-January on a first-come, first-served basis, while supplies last. Locations are listed at the above website.

• **Broward County residents** can drop off trees at one of 13 county parks (list at <http://www.broward.org/PARKS/THINGSTODO/Pages/Chip-a-TreeProgram.aspx>) through Jan. 19. The mulch will be used for landscaping at county parks.

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