



## Start a New Holiday Tradition

By Dr. Matthew Lisy, UConn Adjunct Faculty



Some holiday cacti eagerly waiting for a new home this festive season (photo by M. Lisy).

Holidays and traditions go hand in hand. In fact, I challenge you to find a holiday in which you do not have any traditions. Sure COVID may have impacted our traditions in the past few years, but more or less, traditions withstand the test of time. What I am going to suggest here, is that you consider starting a few new holiday traditions this year. These customs could be with you and your family for a lifetime.

Plants are essential to our lives as we eat them, we build with them, and we decorate with them. A quick trip to any grocery or big box store and you will find many holiday plants for sale. These can make great gifts for family and friends when you visit during the holiday season. Although they will provide many days of beauty and enjoyment, at some point, they fade away

and are disposed of. What was once a thing of beauty and joy is now essentially an addition to the compost bin or trash. But, what if it did not have to be like this?

The following two suggestions will build and amplify the joy you felt with your plants this holiday season, and provide a lifelong legacy in the family. The first suggestion is to go purchase a holiday cactus (*Schlumbergera* species). There are a few different species in the genus, and sometimes what we see in the stores are hybrids. It really matters not which ones you get. I suggest finding one with the color of flowers your family likes the most. If you are anything like me, you will end up with a collection of these plants, each with different colored flowers. These will provide you with joy and flowers throughout this growing season. They make a great houseplant after that, provided they are not over watered (let soil dry between waterings). In their native habitat, they are forest cacti that normally grow as epiphytes on trees in places like the Brazilian rainforests. As such, they like bright, indirect light and some humidity.

They will rebloom next year if they are given long periods of darkness each night about when our days grow shorter near Thanksgiving and Christmas. Different species will bloom at slightly different times, but either way you will be treated to a show of beautiful flowers each winter. The hardest part about getting them to rebloom is placing them in a room that does not receive any artificial light in the evening and is not too hot. This may be an unused guest room or even near windows at your place of work.

Now fast forward a number of years. Each year your beloved Christmas cactus reblooms and continues to grow, bigger and bigger. With proper care it will only get more beautiful each year. Many times family members will start talking about this plant. It may become legendary. The best part is that they are fairly easy to propagate. Break off some of the pads and dip them in rooting hormone. Many will root and you will have a new plant. These “babies” could be given away as gifts. They will now family/friends will have their own piece of this legendary heirloom!



A beautiful laser engraved ornament given to me by a friend many years ago (photo by M. Lisy).

The second family tradition I will suggest involves the Christmas tree. Each year many people bring home a tree to decorate. At some point, before placing it in the stand, a fresh cut is made and you are left with a piece of stump. I would save these and mark the year on them. These can be further cut into slices. A family could make an ornament out of these slices and put the year on it, thereby saving a piece of the “magic”. Better yet is to get some paint and make some sort of design along with the year. Each family member could make their own, or simply have one per year. Some people even get really fancy and use a laser engraver to make intricate designs, but this may cost many hundreds of dollars for the machine. Either way you and your family will be making memories that will last a lifetime.

So stop by your local grocery store on the way to visit family and friends and pick up a long-lived holiday cactus for them. You certainly will put a smile on the faces of the people you visit. You never know, but that thoughtful gift may turn into a multigenerational family tradition! And try saving a slice of your tree. This may become one of the most anticipated parts of the holiday season.

For your gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at [www.ladybug.uconn.edu](http://www.ladybug.uconn.edu) or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.