

Real Estate

GREEN HOUSE **Pride of jungle** **CS Bewli**

For many it may be hard to believe that there are actually 'jungle cacti' which grow naturally in a moist and lush jungle, an environment that is almost the complete opposite of a desert. There are actually two groups of cacti — jungle or rain forest cacti and desert cacti. Plants in both these groups are very different from each other but all belong to the botanical family Cactaceae.

A lot has been written about the thorny desert cacti, the main and the most cultivated group. But due importance has not been given to jungle cacti even though there are a few extremely beautiful flowering species in this group.

Jungle cacti in the genera — Epiphyllum, Ripsalidopsis, Rhipsalis, Schlumbergera and few others are leaf cacti that store water in their leaves. They are known as epiphytic and are quite different in appearance and requirements from their spine-covered desert dwelling counterparts. They have evolved in the tropical rain forests of Brazil where it is warm and humid all year round and have developed thick pad like flat segmented stems with no visible spines.



As it often rains in the tropics, these plants have adapted to grow on trees and above the forest floor for survival in shady conditions. They are called epiphytic because they use their roots on trees and cling tightly to grow on trees without being parasites on them. These plants absorb moisture and nutrients from the air through their leaves to keep them hydrated. Some of them also grow on rocks and in crevices for survival and are called epilithic.

Schlumbergera bridgesii, a Christmas cactus that normally flowers in December and *Schlumbergera truncata*, a Thanksgiving cactus that blooms in autumn are very popular jungle cacti. Due to their beauty and spine-less non-cactus like form they find place in almost all houseplants books and are a favourite with many collectors.

Many plant lovers also call them "orchid cacti" because of the very large and colorful flowers.

Growing medium in cultivation

Compost ingredients of jungle cacti in cultivation are bound to be different from desert cacti because in rain forests as their natural habitat these plants absorb nutrients from air or from dead leaves. Hence tried and suitable compost is made by mixing:

- * One part of properly washed peat to clear off the salt contents.
- * One part leaf mould to provide humus.
- * One part thick and coarse sand with some grit for better drainage.
- * 10 g of bone meal in a 15 cm pot.

Christmas cactus

Christmas cactus is the common name of a species of epiphytic genus *Schlumbergera*. These are good-looking plants with a magnificent display of 5-8 cm long tubular shaped, white to pink coloured blooms. The blooming period is from December to February and the blooms last for a long period of about 3-4 weeks to add colour to the garden when most of the other cacti are dormant. They have flattened leaves with rounded teeth on the margins. This is one cactus whose top foliage can be pruned from the nodes with a sharp knife to encourage the plant to become bushy and have more clumps of blooms in the ensuing season. Pruning is carried out after the flowering period is over and when the plant is in rest. Besides growing it in pot a long lasting and a beautiful hanging basket display can also be created with the species having pendulous type of growth. It is easily propagated through stem segments.

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Tending tips

- * Keep the plant in a well-lit spot, shaded from direct sunlight, preferably on an east-facing window.
- * Fertilise with 5 grams of bone meal (a slow releasing nutrient) every month during growing season during summer.

- * During dormancy they should be watered very sparingly.
- * As it comes from a humid area, don't allow the roots to dry out completely, try to keep them moist at all times as they do not tolerate drought.
- * Repot these plants every alternate year.
- * Compost used should be gritty and freely draining.
- * During dormancy they should be watered very sparingly.

Desert vs jungle cacti

- ✚ Epiphytic cacti evolved in the jungles in warm and humid climate where as desert cacti evolved in deserts where humidity is low and rainfall is scarce.
- ✚ Epiphytic cacti are adapted to growing on trees to tolerate shady conditions, whereas desert cactus is adapted to full sun.
- ✚ Epiphytic cacti need moist compost when in active growth and rest of the time the potting soil should be allowed to dry between watering. On the other hand the potting soil of desert cacti should be allowed to dry out between watering when the plants are actively growing.