

The Press Democrat  
July 12, 2025

## Advice for growing cacti indoors

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS  
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



A small cactus garden sits in a greenhouse in Date and Ben Frey's home garden in Hopland.  
Conner Jay / The Press Democrat 2014

**Question:** I've been growing many types of houseplants for years. However, I'm interested in expanding my collection and trying cactus. I've seen some interesting cacti at my local hardware store. Do you have any tips for growing them?

**Answer:** Certainly! Cacti are an excellent choice for plant enthusiasts. While they do have some specific needs, many are easy to grow and maintain in the home environment.

Cacti belong to the broad, collective family known as succulents. While cacti are succulents, not all succulents are cacti. Cacti have specialized structures, called areoles, from which flowers, spines and other growth structures form. These plants can range from the diminutive South American Blossfeldia (*Blossfeldia liliputana*) at less than 1 inch in height, to the Mexican Giant Cardon (*Pachycereus pringlei*) that

can top sixty feet tall! Although commonly thought of as only desert plants, there are a few species that make their home in tropical areas, such as the commonly marketed Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera* spp).

Many plant enthusiasts find the unique shapes and structures of cacti interesting. While some tropical species may have flat, thornless structures, many arid and desert species develop thorns or spines. These spines may range from soft and fuzzy, as in the case of Old Man Cactus (*Cephalocereus senilis*), to sharp and pointed. These structures provide key functions for cacti, including shade, water collection and protection from predators.

Cacti for the home enthusiast are widely available. However, here are a few tips to help keep them healthy. First, provide enough sunlight. A sunny windowsill is a perfect location for your plants, but keep in mind that desert cacti in particular thrive in low-humid environments. While a living room or kitchen window is appropriate, a humid bathroom might encourage rot. In our sunny Sonoma climate, consider placing your cacti on a covered porch or patio in the dry late spring and summer months.

Next, monitor water use. Allow the soil to completely dry between waterings and reduce water applications in the fall and winter months. Pots with drainage holes are important to prevent water retention. Cacti typically have a wide, shallow root system. To prevent root decay, drain off excess water after a few minutes of soaking. This is especially important when growing cacti in small enclosures, such as a terrarium or tank.

When it comes to potting your cactus, many commercial cactus soil mixtures are available. However, if you are making your own mix, use fresh, sterile components to minimize disease risk. Add coarse sand to fresh potting soil at a 1:1 ratio. The mixture should crumble freely after squeezing. Allow the soil to completely dry between waterings and reduce water applications in the fall and winter months. Although quite hardy, cacti can benefit from occasional fertilizer supplements. Choose a low-nitrogen commercial fertilizer and apply during the spring and summer growing season.

When handling, consider a sturdy pair of thick gloves if you decide to purchase cacti species with sharp spines. If you have children or pets, consider easy-to-touch cacti, such as the Old Man Cactus mentioned earlier, or species with small or no sharp spines. Alternatively, growing your selections in a small, covered terrarium provides a measure of safety.

Many cacti can live for decades or much longer. Of course, never collect specimens from the wild. Harvesting wild cacti is illegal and harms the environment. Excellent online suppliers and resources are available to home enthusiasts. For more information visit these links: <https://pdne.ws/44yOdiX> <https://pdne.ws/3TyaBDC>; <https://pdne.ws/44HAoys>

*Contributors to this week's column were Robert Williams and Lisa Howard. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County [sonomamg.ucanr.edu/](http://sonomamg.ucanr.edu/) provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to [scmgpd@gmail.com](mailto:scmgpd@gmail.com). You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or [mgsonoma@ucanr.edu](mailto:mgsonoma@ucanr.edu).*