

## The Weekly Plant Holiday Edition - 25 Dec 2013

**Common names:** desert Christmas cactus, Christmas cholla, Christmas berry cactus

**Scientific name:** *Cylindropuntia leptocaulis* (formerly *Opuntia leptocaulis*)<sup>1</sup>

### TAV location:

On west side of Langtry: 1)stand on the west side of Langtry facing OST with your back to south property line of lot 148 (line yourself up with the two water meter covers on the east side of Langtry). At the top of the short incline in front of you there is a low-growing prickly pear. The Christmas cholla is growing within the prickly pear on its left (south) side. 2)opposite the Patel/Kilmer driveway take the path by the bench. Go down into the drainage and back up. Look to your left for the painted rock that says “desert Christmas cactus”. The drainage only goes down a foot or two; plant is about 15 feet in.

### Discussion:

This year’s holiday plant is a native found here in Academy Village. Christmas cholla is found from California to Oklahoma and south into Mexico. It gets its holiday name from the fruit, which ripen to a bright red in December.

The scientific name of all the chollas used to be *Opuntia*, the name also used for prickly pear. The *Opuntias* were known as the segmented cactus. Now, the name *Opuntia* is reserved for cactus with flat segments i.e. prickly pear; the more descriptive *Cylindropuntia* is used for chollas, which have cylindrical segments.



The center stem is older, scaly and tan. The side stems are flushed with purple. Some of the fruit has ripened to a bright red. The small, brown “hairs” on the fruit are glochids, small barbed hairs that easily transfer themselves to your skin. If you get glochids embedded in your skin, first try tweezers, then coat the area with household glue. Let the glue dry for 30 min., then peel off. (Martinez TT; Jerome M; Barry RC; Jaeger R; Xander JG. Removal of cactus spines from the skin. A comparative evaluation of several methods. American Journal of Diseases of Children, 1987 Dec, 141(12):1291-2.)

Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey

Christmas cholla segments are narrower than those of other chollas, about 1/4” in diameter. Older stems may turn a scaly tan while newer stems may be purplish. You will often find this cholla growing among other plants (both plants for which the location is given above are growing this way). With that little extra shade and support, Christmas cholla can grow to 6 feet and develop a short trunk. Plants in the Village are 1-3 feet high. Greenish yellow flowers appear on this cholla in summer, usually May/June and open in late afternoon. The fruit is small but relished by many birds and animals.

Christmas cholla tends to have a long stem with many short side branches. These are easily detached. If you plant this cactus, don’t throw away the parts that fall off. Instead stick them in the ground. They may root and you’ll have a whole new plant. This ability to form a new plant from just a small piece is one of the things that separates plants from animals. Given the right conditions, the stems of many plants produce roots and thus create a new plant.

I recently planted a Christmas cholla. A number of segments fell off as did several fruit. So I tried an experiment. What we see as cactus “fruit” is really a botanical fruit enclosed in a flower “tube”. That tube is made of stem tissue. Since cactus stems will root, I thought the stem tissue of a cactus “fruit” might root as well. I tried it and it worked! Only one has rooted so far but I’m hoping I’ll have lots of rooted segments and fruit by spring. I’ll plant a few in my yard but should have some left over. Let me know if you want one. First come first serve.



Fruit from Christmas cholla, with new roots. The fruit was placed in well-drained potting mix and kept on the dry side. It was outside until this recent round of cold weather.

<sup>1</sup> The Plant List (Kew Botanic Garden) is the source for the currently accepted name: <http://www.theplantlist.org/>.