

Night-Blooming Cereus Cactus

By Joyce Dare, Bexar County Master Gardener

Night-blooming cereus is the common name referring to a large number of flowering ceroid cacti that bloom only at night. The flowers are short-lived, and some of these species, such as Selenicereus grandifloras, bloom only once a year, and for just a single night. Other names for one or more cacti with this habit are princess of the night, Honolulu queen, Christ in the manger, dama de noche, and queen of the night.



Photo Credit: Dwight Dare

Regardless of genus or species, night-blooming cereus flowers are almost always white or very pale shades of other colors. The blooms are frequently large and aromatic. Most of the flowers open after nightfall, and by dawn, sadly, most are beginning to wilt. Interestingly, plants located in the same vicinity tend to bloom on the same night.

Healthy cereus cacti may have as many as three separate blooming events spread out over the warmest months. The plants that bear such flowers can be tall, columnar, and often extremely large and tree-like. More typically, the plants are thin-stemmed climbers. While some night-blooming cereus are grown indoors in homes or greenhouses in colder climates, these plants generally flourish outside in tropical areas.

My night-blooming cereus cactus is a beautiful plant that spreads out between two oak trees and next to several shrubs in the backyard. It is planted in a pot about one-foot in diameter and sits atop a two-foot high stand. Right next to it is another pot containing its offspring, and this second plant sits on a one-foot high stand.

The picture above shows the three phases of blooms. The two sad drooping ones on the right opened one day before the three open blooms. In another day or so, the two erect, closed blooms in the bottom part of the photo will open at night for us to enjoy for a single morning.

When we were moving what I call the “mother plant” into its present location a couple of years ago, a few of the stems broke off. I then dipped them in Rooting Hormone and planted them in potting soil in their new container. As I watered the mother plant, I cared for the new plant and the stems took root in their container. This propagated plant has now grown stems that are about four-feet in length.



I have found that a good fertilizer is a combination of liquid Medina Hasta Grow and Liquid Seaweed (per their directions for a 5-gallon bucket of water), to which I add a capful of SUPERthrive. Just a week or so after an application of this fertilizer, I see signs of blooms beginning on both plants.

In fact, we have had as many as 14 blooms on the two plants at one time, with three or four opening in the night, followed the next day by the opening of about six blooms, and then the rest on the third night. One morning we set our alarm to awaken us at 6 AM to experience the beautiful blooms, which start closing at 8 or 9 in the morning. If it is warm, the flowers will close sooner.

The night-blooming cereus is one of the most fascinating and beautiful plants in our garden and, not surprisingly, they need protection in the winter months. Together with our hibiscus, other tropical plants, and some fruit trees that don't tolerate extreme cold, we carry them into our garage, where we have fans, grow-lights, and a heater. It's a chore, but we think it is worth it to save these beautiful plants that give us so much joy in our backyard!

If interested, we have a couple of one-gallon pots with rooted stems that I will give to the first couple of Master Gardeners who talk with me and ask for one.

I hope this will enable you to propagate new Night-Blooming Cereus cacti and widely share them with your fellow Master Gardeners and friends. Enjoy!