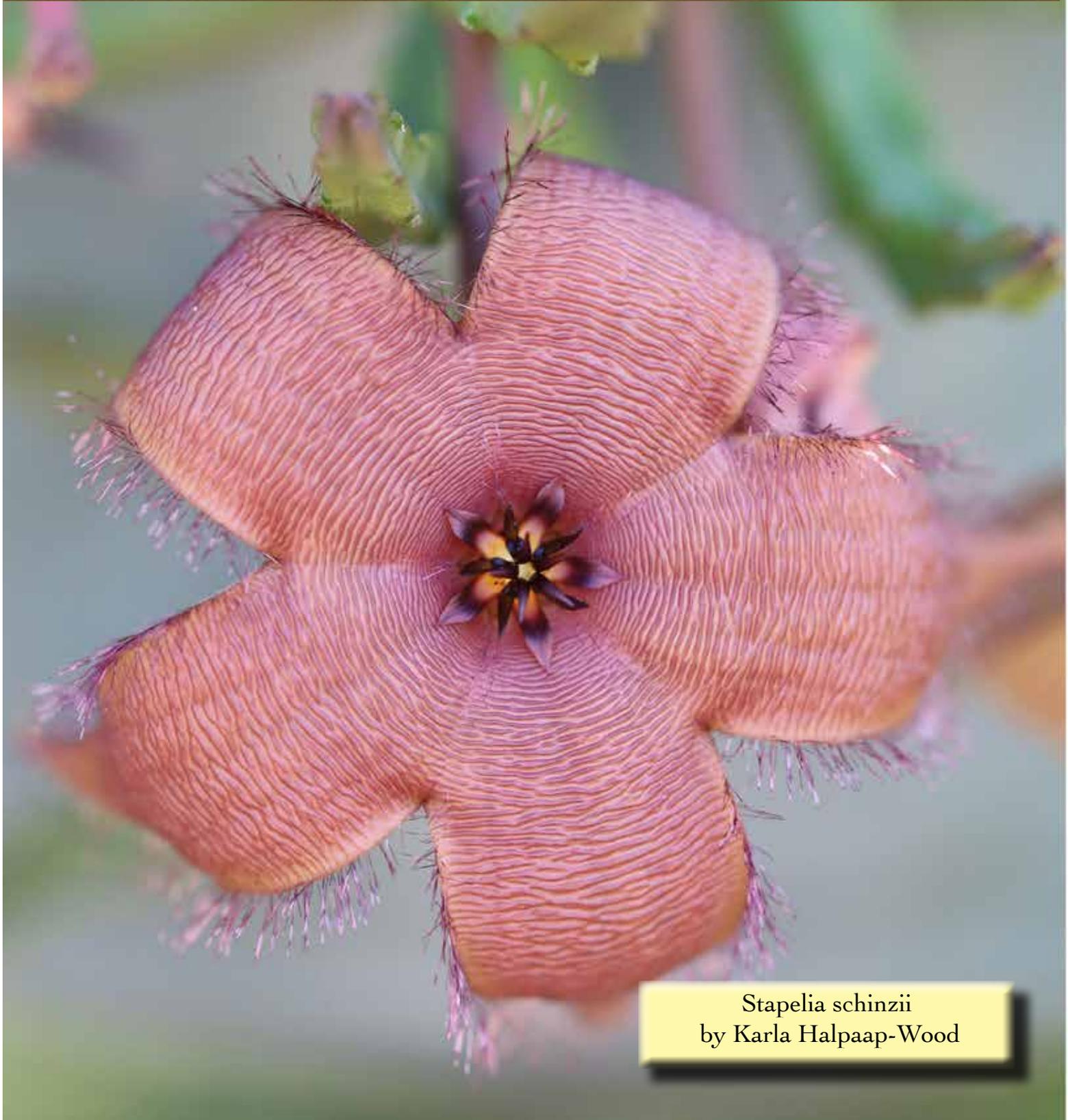


NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2023

VOL. 60  
NO. 6

# Kaktos Komments

a bimonthly publication of the Houston Cactus and Succulent Society  
to promote the study of cacti and other succulents



*Stapelia schinzii*  
by Karla Halpaap-Wood



**Houston Cactus and Succulent Society**  
**Founded in 1963**  
**Affiliated with the Cactus & Succulent Society of America**

## Membership

## Lana Sands and Andrea Varesic

On September 27, 2023, HCSS met at the Metropolitan Multi-Service Center. There were 26 members in attendance. The program of the evening was presented by David Whipkey of the Houston Bromeliad Society.



The program was named "Xerophytic Bromeliads - Tough Plants You Might Learn to Love". Additionally, the Houston Bromeliad Society donated plants to be raffled off throughout the presentation. The donations were from the collection of Frank and Cherie Lee, who are members of both societies, and David Whipkey.

The Cactus of the Month was presented by David Van Langan, *Mammilloidya candida*. The Succulent of the Month was presented by Andrea Varesic, *Euphorbia xanti*. The August Cactus of the Month was presented by Josie Watts, *Echinocereus viridiflorus*.

We had a silent auction of two succulents and two sets of books from the memorial collection of Mr. Grant Wells. Karina Boese also donated to the silent auction her inaugural painting of the 60th anniversary of HCSS KK cover.

We had a plant raffle in addition to three flats of cacti and succulents that were free to the members in attendance. The estate of Grant Wells gave our club many books on cacti and succulents. These were also on the "free to a good home" table. Thank you again, Mr. Grant Wells.

On October 25, at 7 PM, the HCSS met at the Metropolitan Multi-service Center. There were twenty five members in attendance. We also had a live stream on Zoom, for those who are unable to attend in person. Jennifer Perskey, the nominating committee chairman, presented the candidates for the five board positions to be voted upon. The new board members were approved by the membership.

They are as follows:

President Andrea Varesic  
 First Vice President Echo Pang  
 Second Vice President Cindy Gray Strickland  
 Secretary Benjamin Stroble  
 Treasurer Bruce Moffet

Congratulations to all!

As a club, the HCSS can bestow the honor of life membership to two members, who meet the criterias of the bylaws. The board voted to give this honor for 2023 to Josie Watts and Bruce Moffett, as a family, and Karla Halpaap-Wood. The 2024 life numbers are Dave Thomas and Wally Ward. Thank you all for the time and effort you have given to the club. The presentation for the month was given by Joseph Rodd. "Cacti of Big Bend National Park" showed Joseph's trip to the park and illustrated how to start the search for rare cacti for photographic purposes. The cactus of the month was presented by Wally Ward, *Brasiliopuntia brasiliensis*. The succulent of the month, *Brusera microphylla*, was presented by David Van Langan. Door prizes, donations from the membership, were given out. They were many books from the estate of Grant Wells that were available free to a good home. The raffle table was active with donations from our members.

**TACSS Fall Seminar Report****Josie Watts**

The 2023 annual TACSS Fall Seminar was hosted by the Central Texas Cactus and Succulent Society in Waco, Texas October 21/22, 2023. As usual, they did an outstanding job. Speakers were Woody Minich, who gave a presentation about plants in South America, and another about South Africa Little and Great Karoo. Jeff Moore, author of a recent book about agaves, spoke about various species and their care. Jimmy Black gave a presentation about transplanting cactus, which included movement of stressed or endangered plants and how they are handled. All presentations were excellent and, as always, I felt I learned something from each and every talk. We had free time to visit the new and enlarged gardens the Waco club is creating at the Carleen Bright Arboretum. It was very exciting, because some of the very plants included in Jimmy Black's talk were included, along with seedlings and other specimens donated by club members. I shared photos on our FB page. There was an auction of very special plants, which is their largest fundraiser, followed by a barbecue dinner at the arboretum. The best plants from each club were shown and winners were selected by popular vote. Another feature of TACSS is the plant sale. Woody Minich actually sold plants from all over the world, many of which he is responsible for introducing into the trade. South Austin Succulents also had a booth, along with several sponsored by other TACSS members. The selection is always amazing. We have made many friends through the years, and it is always a wonderful time to socialize. Sunday morning is devoted to visiting member gardens/greenhouses. Steven Lovecki and Ernie Petru were hosts this year. In the past, we have considered TACSS as the fall fieldtrip, and should resume that habit, which stopped due to Covid.



60th anniversary pot for HCSS

**Calendar:**

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| <b>November 8, 2023</b>  | 7:00 pm Board Meeting via Zoom   |
| <b>November 15, 2023</b> | 7:00 pm Membership Meeting, Metropolitan Multi-Service Center<br>Program: PUERTO VALLARTA BOTANICAL GARDEN, by Josie Watts and Bruce Moffett, HCSS |
| <b>December 3, 2023</b>  | Christmas party at 5 pm Rivas 1117 Missouri St, Houston, TX 77006  |
| <b>January 1, 2024</b>   | Deadline for submitting articles for the KK.   |

## November Cactus of the Month

Jeff Boggan

**NAME: *Stenocactus obvallatus* subspecies *caespitosus***

(sten-oh-KAK-tus)(ob-val-LAY-tus)(key-as-pi-to-sus)

**SYNONYMS:** Echinofossulocactus caespitosus

**COMMON NAME(S):** Tepenexcomitl (Te-pen-ex-co-meal)

Brain cactus, accordion cactus

**HABITAT/DISTRIBUTION:** This plant grows in Central Mexico across numerous states in the Chihuahuan Desert.

1. It is usually found at altitudes between 6,000 up to 7,000 feet above sea level.
2. The soil is low nutrient, rocky, and porous.
3. The environment is very arid and low rainfall.



**DESCRIPTION (STEM, FLOWERS, FRUITS):**

1. Stem is OBOVOID. This means that it is egg or fruit shaped with the broad end towards the apex.
  - a. The common Mexican name, Tepenexcomitl, triggers the image of it being comet shaped.
  - b. The plant grows to a height of 7 to 8 inches tall. This is dependant on environment and how long the plant survives.
  - c. Caespitosus means that the plant grows in clusters. Some plants grow as a solitary steam but others will produce pups around the body of the plant.

It will also branch off as the plant grows taller and leans on the grown. The pups will be produced along the trunk of the body getting the most sun.

- d. The stem has between 25 to 50 wavy ribs. The number of ribs will vary to the age and variety of the plant.
  - The mature stem of the caespitosus specimens have between 37 and 40 ribs.
- e. The trunk of the main stem varies between 3.25 to 4 inches in diameter.

This is dependant upon growing conditions and if the plant has been recently watered.

2. The plant will start to flower during the growing season in the spring. However, it will flower whenever the conditions are favorable. That is beacuse in habitat it is very arid so if there is significant rain the plant will take advantage of the opportunity to reproduce. Plants will also flower and try to reproduce when they are highly stressed and near the point of death.
3. The areoles produce a flat central spine that varies between 1.25 to 1.375 inches and 2 opposing spines that are .75 inches long. There are 5 small radial spines below the 3 central spines. The spines overlap and interlace with others along the ribs. This produces a dense mesh that is difficult for scavanging animals to penetrate.

**CULTIVATION/GROWTH:**

Growing conditions and soil requirements will vary depending upon the average humidity in the climate where you live. The more humid your climate the more you need to adjust the soil and growing location for the plant.

- A. The soil should be changed in the pot every 3 to 4 years.

Soil mix should be adjusted to your climate zone.

The higher the humidity the more mineral your soil mixture needs to be.

1. Coconut core - 15%
  2. Leaf humus - 20%
  3. Compost manure - 20%
  4. Pumice or Pearlite - 15%
  5. Coarse sand - 15%
  6. Sand - 15%
- B. Temperature, humidity, and lighting:
    1. These plants are very hardy and can withstand a wide range of temperatures.

The lower the humidity the better the plant can handle extremes.

Temperature can range from 24 to 120 degrees Fahrenheit. (-4° to 49° Celsius)

2. The plant needs good air circulation to keep it healthy and free from pests.

3. Sun - an Easterly morning sun is good for these plants.

They should have protection from the harsh afternoon Southern sun in the summer.

They need a strong sun to produce healthy spines, good color, and keep them pest free.

#### C. Pots:

1. Clay pots are recommended for better aeration.

You want your soil to dry out within 3-days after watering to prevent rotting.

2. Plastic pots can be used but you will need to increase the mineral portion of your soil mix to 80%.

#### D. Water - use fresh rain water or ph neutral water.

Try to avoid city treated tap water or highly alkaline well water.

#### AVAILABILITY:

1. East Austin Succulents - <https://eastaustinsucculents.com/>

2. Miles-2-Go Cactus Nursery - <https://www.miles2go.com/>

3. Mesa Gardens - <https://mesagarden.com/>

4. Lowes Garden Center

5. Home Depot Garden Center

5. The Cactus King (Houston, Texas)- <https://thecactusking.com/>

#### REMARKS/COMMENTS/MY EXPERIENCE:

I have had the specimens pictured for several years. They have endured the hard freezes when most everything else froze. They have also endured the harsh summer heat without watering. I keep them under the car port facing the East morning sun. They only get watered when it rains and the soil is allowed to fully dry out between waterings. They are protected from the cold North and strong Southern winds. The soil is an 80% Perlite and 20% compost mix. I keep them in cages to protect them from the prowling and destructive critters.



#### REFERENCES:

1. Daves Garden - <https://davesgarden.com/guides/pf/go/143724>

2. Encyclopedia of living forms - Echinofossulocactus caespitosus - [https://www.llifile.com/Encyclopedia/CACTI/Family/Cactaceae/6295/Echinofossulocactus\\_caespitosus](https://www.llifile.com/Encyclopedia/CACTI/Family/Cactaceae/6295/Echinofossulocactus_caespitosus)

3. Encyclopedia of living forms - Stenocactus obvallatus - [https://www.llifile.com/Encyclopedia/CACTI/Family/Cactaceae/6285/Stenocactus\\_obvallatus](https://www.llifile.com/Encyclopedia/CACTI/Family/Cactaceae/6285/Stenocactus_obvallatus)

4. National Garding Association - <https://garden.org/plants/view/129807/Tepenexcomitl-Stenocactus-obvallatus/>

#### INTERNET LINKS:

##### YouTube:

1. Stenocactus cultivation (Closed Caption Translation)- [https://youtu.be/w\\_VRI0WqCR0](https://youtu.be/w_VRI0WqCR0)

2. How to pronouce caespitosus - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VALbVwMbiyk>

3. Stenocactus crispatus (San Luis Potosi) - [https://youtu.be/bdhP3\\_8IZCE](https://youtu.be/bdhP3_8IZCE)

4. Stenocactus Multicostatus en h-bitat - <https://youtu.be/fBBLqLo90QQ>

5. Stenocactus crispatus identification - <https://cactiguide.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=13756>

6. Stenocactus en habitat( Guanajuato) - <https://youtu.be/Tc67aBrg67Q>

7. 10 Tipos De Stenocactus - <https://youtu.be/hSqDkEbEzz8>

8. Stenocactus aka Echinofossulocactus - <https://youtu.be/DPx1mTNm19E>

## November Succulent of the Month

Kristi Schmidt

Name: 'Sharkskin Agave'

**Synonyms:** Agave 'Sharkskin Shoes', Agave 'Ruth Bancroft', Hort., 'Sharkskin Shoes', Agave nickelsiae x scabra 'Sharkskin', Agave asperima x ferdinandi-regis, Agave ferdinandi-regis x scabra, Agave asperima x victoriae-reginae, Agave scabra x victoriae-reginae

**Family:** Agavaceae

**Origin:** Mexico – as a naturally occurring hybrid

I have been in possession of this interesting agave since this January. It is supposed to reach its mature size very slowly eventually growing to 2-3 feet high by 3-4 feet wide. The leaves have smooth black margins each ending with a very sharp terminal spine. This is a medium size agave. It is darker but muted gray-green agave that grows into symmetrical shape. The texture of each leaf feels rough like the finest sandpaper hence the comparison to shark skin. It reproduces offsets from roots, often referred to as agave pups.

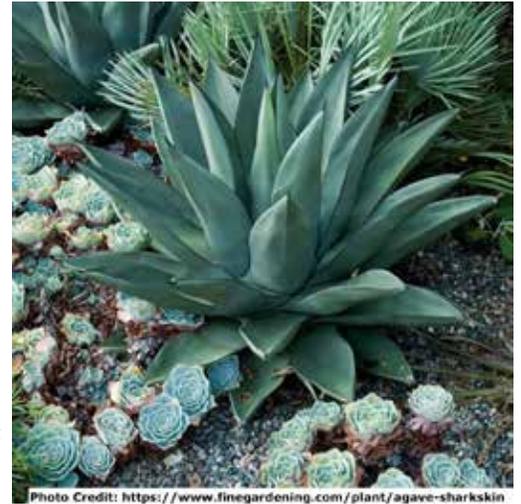


Photo Credit: <https://www.finegardening.com/plant/agave-sharkskin>

Just like most agave plants, this plant thrives in full sun and very little water. I have been battling leaf lesions that seem to appear when the weather gets colder and wetter. My plant is potted in well-drained soil, a mixture of pumice, succulent soil mix, expanded shale a little bit of local clay from my backyard. One day, this plant might be planted in my backyard, and I want it to get familiar with the local soil composition.



Photo Credit: Kristi Schmidt

Most literature claims Agave Sharkskin is hardy to 20-25F although some sources listed it as low as 10-15F. This plant is a hybrid of the Agave ferdinandii-regis and Agave scabra.

A.ferdinandii-regis is a form of A. Victoria-reginae, yet these two were once considered separate species. Both tolerate cold temperatures very well along with A.scabra.

Therefore, I have high hopes this Agave Sharkskin should stand strong in temperatures below 32F as well.

This naturally occurring hybrid originated in Mexico. When shopping around I have seen it being labeled as Agave ferdinandi x Agave scabra or Agave victoria-reginae x asperima.

Many places have collections of this plant, but two most famous ones that are tied to its origin are The Huntington Botanic Garden and Ruth Bancroft Garden. Most likely there are multiple collections of this hybrid which means not all the plants are identical.

Quote from San Marcos Growers: "Another bit of confusion is the name Agave 'Ruth Bancroft' that has been applied to this plant. Although some of the plants in cultivation have originated from the Ruth Bancroft Garden, this name is confusing and not supported by Brian Kemble, Ruth Bancroft Garden Plant Curator and

Assistant Director, who notes that there is another Agave introduced by the garden that already goes by this name. Whatever you call this plant, it sure is beautiful.”



References:

- <https://www.smgrowers.com/info/AgaveSharkskin.asp>
- [https://www.smgrowers.com/products/plants/plantdisplay.asp?plant\\_id=3322](https://www.smgrowers.com/products/plants/plantdisplay.asp?plant_id=3322)
- <https://shop.cacti.com/landscape-succulents/agave-sharkskin-aka-sharkskin/>



## December Cactus of the Month

Echo Pang

*Mammillaria plumosa*

Common name: Feather Cactus

Family: Cactaceae

**Habitat and climate:** Nuevo León, Mexico, from the border of Coahuila to Monterrey, grows at elevations of 730 to 1350 meters (2395 to 4429 ft.) above sea level on limestone cliffs in sparse xerophytic shrubland.

Nuevo León has many biomes. In the northern part of the state the climate is arid as a result of the proximity to the Chihuahuan desert. Extreme high temperatures of 47 °C (117°F) or more occur on the desert areas while winters are short and mild. Some areas in the mountains are very cold in winter and temperate in summer.

In Monterrey the climate is hot semi-arid with extreme hot summers and mild winters. There is very little rainfall throughout the year, usually about 500 mm (19.7 inches) or less. February 2021 American ice storm sent temperatures in Monterrey below zero Celsius (freezing).

**Conservation status:** Near threatened due to illegally collection. The local community also collects plants from the wild and sells them at Christmas time for decorate nativity scenes.



*M. plumosa* in habitat: Ad Konings observed in Nuevo León, MX. <https://www.inaturalist.org/observations/50719416>



Snowy mount form of *M. plumosa* with white flowers in Echo Pang's collection

**Description:** *Mammillaria plumosa* is a clumping cactus that grows into snowy looking mounds. There are two different forms of growth. One forms mounds of even level-topped heads; the other one shows distinct separate heads, also known as the 'golf ball' form. A clump can easily get to over 40 cm wide and the entire plant is covered by the mass of white feathery spines. It has light green stems but appearing white because of the dense spines. The feathery nature of the spines tends to hold water over the plant, which can be troublesome in cold and humid conditions. But the feathery spines can provide epidermal protection against the blasting sun of the desert. **Flowers:** Whitish yellow, up to 3-15 mm long. Some plants have flowers with pink midstrips. The flowers have with a pleasant sweet scent. **Fruits:** About 15 mm long, club-shaped with a deep purplish-rose color, hidden by the spines. **Seeds:** Black.



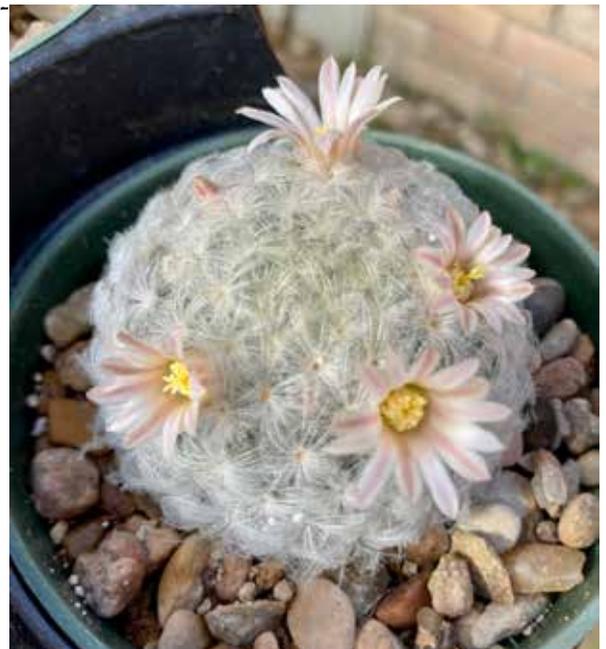
Houston Cactus and Succulent Society Fall 2023 Best of Show- *M. plumosa* submitted by John Weistroffer.

**Cultivation:** Needs regular water in summer, but don't over water during the hottest time as the cactus can slow down growth under extreme heat. Keep water off of the spines when watering. It is not suggested to stop watering in winter as the plant is usually in flowers. A mineral based soil is advised to use for its tuberous roots, which can prone to rot if they stay wet for any length of time. In Houston, it needs full sun from fall to spring, light shade in summer.

**Propagation:** From seeds, offset separation, and detached tubercles. It is reported that both offsets and detached tubercles will form roots rapidly and become a plant easily given the right condition.

#### Reference:

1. John Pilbeam: "Mammillaria- A Collector's Guide" Universe Books 1981.
2. [http://www.llifile.com/Encyclopedia/CACTI/Family/Cactaceae/9350/Mammillaria\\_plumosa](http://www.llifile.com/Encyclopedia/CACTI/Family/Cactaceae/9350/Mammillaria_plumosa)
3. Wikipedia: Nuevo Leon- Climate [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuevo\\_Le%C3%B3n#:~:text=Nuevo%20Le%C3%B3n%20has%20an%20extreme,arid%20region%20in%20the%20south](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuevo_Le%C3%B3n#:~:text=Nuevo%20Le%C3%B3n%20has%20an%20extreme,arid%20region%20in%20the%20south).



'Golf ball' form of *M. plumosa* white flowers with pink stripes in Echo Pang's collection

## December Succulent of the Month

Karla Halpaap-Wood

### *Alluaudia procera*

Common Name: Octopus tree, Madagascar Ocotillo, Madagascan Ocotillo, African Ocotillo

Scientific Name: *Alluaudia procera*

Family Name: Didiereaceae

Origin: South Madagascar

The Didiereaceae is a small family endemic to Madagascar, consisting of four genera, *Alluaudia*, *Alluaudiopsis*, *Decaryia*, and *Didierea*, with eleven species total. The spiny stems of the plants look similar to columnar species of *Euphorbia* or cacti and the Didiereaceae are sometimes known as “the cacti of the old world”.

The whole family is threatened by habitat destruction and utilization of the wood for construction and charcoal production. Another threat to Didiereaceae is collection for horticulture. All species are in demand by collectors, but they rarely flower in cultivation, and seed is in short supply.

**Habitat:** It is one of the thorny plants of the Madagascan spine forests (along with *Pachypodium* species) found in the island’s semi-arid southwest. It grows in areas that might not receive any rain for more than a year. It can withstand extended periods of drought, but lacks the water storage tissues associated with most true succulents. Plants in the *Alluaudia* family vary from small shrubs to tall trees. All are deciduous in the dry season but leaf out virtually over night when the rains come.

**Description:** *Alluaudia procera* is a spiny and scarcely branched small succulent tree. The plant can grow 1.5-3 m high indoors and up to 18 m tall in its native habitat. This is the only truly woody Didiereacea. Leaves are small, oval or rounded, green succulent growing directly off the trunk, 1 to 5 cm long.

The leaves will drop during any lengthy dry periods. Flowers are yellowish white in clusters at the end of the branches. *Alluaudia* are dioecious, individual plants are either male or female. Flowers will be produced in mature specimens taller than 3 m

It resembles the American ocotillo *Fouquieria splendens* with red flowers. Both have small rounded leaves and grayish trunks with a lot of spines. This is an example of convergent evolution - unrelated plants adapting similar shapes and survival strategies in response to the same environmental conditions.

**Cultivation:** It needs full sun with a very well drained soil mix. It is frost tender, but mature plants can survive 0° C. It is not freely branching, but will branch when the tip is cut.



#### References:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alluaudia\\_procera](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alluaudia_procera)

<https://prota.prota4u.org/protav8.asp?h=M4&t=Alluaudia,procera&p=Alluaudia+procera#Synonyms>

[http://www.llifile.com/Encyclopedia/TREES/Family/Didiereaceae/487/Alluaudia\\_procera](http://www.llifile.com/Encyclopedia/TREES/Family/Didiereaceae/487/Alluaudia_procera)

<https://www.pslbg.org/madagascar-ocotillo.html>

During the 2023 biennial convention held in Colorado Springs last July, members of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) were concerned about the business practices of several members within the C & S community. These concerns were formalized in written letters sent to the CSSA, and the local involved cactus clubs and have not been disclosed.



In light of these concerns, a conference took place on September 2, 2023 involving select board CSSA members, Gunnar Eisel, CSSA executive director, key personnel from the Huntington Botanical Gardens, Botanical Gardens Conservation International (BGCI), the LA Arboretum, and representatives from IUCN. The primary focus of this meeting was to encourage collaboration among stakeholders, and to discuss conservation initiatives and anti-poaching strategies.

The key points of discussion were:

1. A strengthened collaboration aimed to enhance collaboration in cacti and succulent plants conservation.
2. Conservation and anti-poaching strategies, emphasizing the importance of effective conservation initiatives.
3. Unified enforcement policies at both, national and international levels.
4. Ethical standards and guidelines to ensure smooth interactions and standardized conservation approaches.
5. Plant provenance to verify the source of long-held plants. However, the group did not set specific guidelines or provided detailed recommendations. More concise show entry procedures and guidelines may be needed.
6. It was also agreed to enhance the clarity and strength of contract language for organizing entities and shows, emphasizing clear roles, responsibilities and expectations.

Among other news, Gunnar Eisel, CSSA Executive Director for the last 14 years has decided to step down. Gunnar's last day will be December 31, 2023, and we have received the guidelines for interested applicants. If you would like to receive a copy, please send a message to Liliana Cracraft, [opuntia77@yahoo.com](mailto:opuntia77@yahoo.com)

At this point, only 10 members of HCSS are also members of CSSA. Please consider joining this great organization to expand your knowledge on Cactus & Succulents. Annual membership is \$50, or a supportive membership (minus the Journal) is only \$20.

Lastly, thank you very much to those of you who submitted votes for the 2024 CSSA Director Candidates. The results will be published at a later date.

2023 Show and Sale  
September 22-23



Best cactus  
*Rebutia rauschii*  
Richard Stamper



Best succulent  
*Euphorbia francoisii*  
Richard Stamper



Best of Show  
*Mammillaria plumosa*  
John Weistroffer



Best Dead Cactus  
Liliana Cracraft



Best artistic display  
*Portulacaria afra*  
Karina Boese



Best educational display  
A Leather-Like Product Developed from  
the Prickly Pear Cactus  
Karla Halpaap-Wood



First Place sweepstakes  
*Turbinocarpus alonsoi*  
Richard Stamper



## FROM THE KK ARCHIVES: The Poinsettia, Mexico's Gift to the World

By Liliana Cracraft



The poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) is the symbol of Christmas in many countries throughout the world. This beautiful plant is native of central México where is known by many names. The most common one is *La Flor de Nochebuena* (Holy night flower or Flower of Christmas Eve), although is also known as *Flor del Pastor* (Shepherd's Flower) and *Estrella de Navidad* (Yuletide Star).

These plants are more abundant near the town of Taxco, Guerrero, and the valleys surrounding Cuernavaca in the State of Morelos. In habitat, the plants are large, woody shrubs, often reaching 10 feet in height. The upper leaves, which can measure between 3 to 5 inches, turn bright red when the plants come into bloom between October and April, looking like the petals of a beautiful flower. However, the flowers are the tiny yellow glands found in the center of the plant.

Between the 14th and 16th Centuries, long before the introduction of Christianity into the occidental world, poinsettias were cultivated by the Aztecs for their beauty and medicinal properties. They were called "Cuetlaxochitl" which in the Nahuatl language means "mortal flower that perishes and withers like all that is pure." The flowers were highly appreciated by the Aztec emperors Netzahualcoyotl and Moctezuma (also known as Montezuma), even though their cultivation in the City of Tenochtitlan was difficult. Their leaves were crushed to extract a reddish purple dye for their textiles and cosmetics, and the sap was used to treat fevers. The bracts were often placed in the chests of those suffering afflictions of the heart to help stimulate circulation and they were sometimes crushed to a pulp to be used as a poultice for the treatment of skin infections.

The first historical registry on the use of Poinsettias during Christmas is related to Franciscan monks living in southern Mexico during the 17th Century. These monks began using these flowers as a Christmas decoration during the Fiesta del Santo Pesebre, or Feast of the Holy Manger. They fell in love with their beautiful red color, and they timely bloomed during the Christmas holidays. Then the use of these flowers during Christmas began to spread all over México. There are also many legends that explain how the Poinsettia became associated with Christmas. One of the best known (with some variations on the main character) says that a little Mexican girl named "Pepita" from the town of Taxco, was sad for not being able to bring a gift to baby Jesus for the Christmas eve mass. Her cousin Pedro told her that even the simplest of the gifts will be acceptable if it was given with love. Upon listening to her cousin's advice, "Pepita" took a bouquet of weeds from the field and placed them by the manger located in the front of the local church. To everyone's surprise, the next morning the simple weeds had transformed into beautiful red flowers. Everyone who witnessed this occurrence labeled it as a miracle, and the plant began to be known as the Christmas Eve flower.

The person credited with taking a Poinsettia north of the border into the United States was Dr. Joel Roberts Poinsett, the first U.S. Ambassador to Mexico. He was a trained physician but was also very interested in botany. In 1825, while visiting Taxco, he became enchanted with the red color of the poinsettia's "blooms." Upon his return to the U.S. he took some plants to his home in Greenville, South Carolina, where he began to study them and propagate them. Later he was distributing them among his horticulturists friends and some bo-

anical gardens. At that time, poinsettias were considered as weeds by many botanists. However, within a few years, the plant had gained acceptance as a holiday plant, despite its short blooming time. The plant eventually arrived into a nursery owned by Robert Buist. He is believed to have been the first person who sold poinsettias commercially in the United States. In 1833 the plant was given the common name Poinsettia, in honor of Dr. Poinsett. In the 1920s, Albert and Paul Ecke began field growing poinsettias in the Hollywood and Beverly Hills areas. The plants were grown in its original form, as bushes, and the flowers were sold freshly cut. Eventually the Eckes developed a shorter plant with more branches. A few years later, they introduced an “improved Albert Ecke Poinsettia” that produced a higher number of perfect branches. The next big step in the cultivation of poinsettias occurred in 1960 when its cultivation and propagation moved from the fields and into greenhouses. In 1963, the first potted plants were sold and the Ecke brothers began to promote the poinsettias as the Christmas flower. To this day, the Ecke Ranch, located in Encinitas, California, is the largest producer of Poinsettia mother plants used for cutting by commercial growers.

The poinsettias we see today are the result of many years of research and hybridization processes. They hardly resemble the tall, leggy red plant that grows in Mexico. The plants have also been manipulated to produce blooms that will last much longer. Some very attractive miniature varieties are now also available.

Recognizing the poinsettia’s importance, the U.S. congress declared December 12th as National Poinsettia Day. This day honors Dr. Poinsett who died on December 12, 1851.

#### A Few Other Facts about Poinsettias

- There are over 100 varieties of poinsettias available.
- Red is the most popular color (70% of Americans), accounting for  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the Christmas sales.
- In addition to red, Poinsettias come in a variety of colors including salmon, cream, apricot to yellow, and white.
- The poinsettia is not a poisonous plant. It has been tested and cleared by the Natural Poison Center in Atlanta, GA, and the American Medical Association. If ingested, however, it may cause an upset stomach.
- The sticky white sap may cause skin irritation in some people.
- Poinsettias are called The Crown of the Andes in Chile and Peru.
- Poinsettias are also called the lobster flower and flame leaf flower.
- 90% of all poinsettias are exported from the U.S. and are grown in all 50 states.
- California is the top producer state with about 27 million pots grown, followed by Texas, North Carolina, Ohio, and Michigan.
- In the U.S. more than 65 million Poinsettias are sold during Christmas.
- Poinsettias account for one third of all potted plants sold in the U.S.
- An NCCA Bowl game in San Diego is named the Poinsettia Bowl.
- There are many elementary schools in California named “Poinsettia.”
- In México, a dark full-bodied beer named ‘Noche Buena’ is brewed between the months of October and December. True beer connoisseurs anxiously await its release every year.



## To take care of your Poinsettia after Christmas

1. Place your plant in light-medium light areas, but they can tolerate low light. Avoid full sun to prevent burned leaves.
2. Water when the soil surface becomes dry. Leaves should be sprinkled gently with a mist.
3. Keep temperature between 60 and 70 degrees F.
4. Pots should not be in direct contact with the floor. They should be placed on a bed of gravel or another pot.
5. The soil should be sterile and free of weeds and insects, toxic elements, herbicides, heavy metals or soluble salts. Humus can be added.
6. Poinsettias require high levels of nitrogen and potassium, but manure, superphosphates, or ammonium fertilizers should not be used.
7. An old Mexican tale states that plants facing north do better.



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