

San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

Cactus of the Month April 2001 – *Gymnocalycium*

Gymnocalycium are among the most popular of cacti, from the novice through the advanced grower. They are easy to grow; flower readily; come in a large number of distinguishable species; look great in flower, in bud, and even when dormant. They have a long flowering period, starting in late spring, and continuing into the fall. A well grown plant will flower several times during the year.



Gymnocalycium is an old genus, first named in 1845. The genus is named for the naked (spineless) calyx (the outermost covering of the bud and lower flower). Most *Gymnocalycium* are also readily identified by their 'chins' beneath the areoles.

The heart of the genus *Gymnocalycium* is Argentina, although the genus stretches into Southeastern Bolivia, Western Paraguay, Uruguay, and into the Southernmost part of Brazil. For the most part *Gymnocalycium* are grassland plants, growing and shaded in the grass of the Pampa and Chaco (dry forest) that covers much of Argentina. As a result, most like some protection from full afternoon sun, but need bright light during the day. Some, however grow in mud flats and exposed areas. Best growth will be achieved by a quick check in one of the references to find the appropriate light level.

Gymnocalycium cultivation is easy. They need a dry rest during the winter, most can take Southern California climate without winter heat, as long as they are dry. They should be fed regularly with a weak general purpose fertilizer when growing. They are tolerant of any well drained soil, but constant wet will cause the roots to rot. Fortunately, they are easy to re-root, with roots generally re-growing in a just few months.

Gymnocalycium are easy to grow from seed, started in a well drained, damp potting mix in a plastic bag covered pot. Germination is fairly rapid, but growth during the first year is slow compared to most *Mammillaria* and many other genera. Vegetative propagation is also easy. Offsets from clumps can be removed, left to dry for a few days and potted. They generally root within a few weeks.

All the species of *Gymnocalycium* are worth growing. Each has it's unique charm.

San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

Cactus of the Month April 2001 – *Gymnocalycium*

Great *Gymnocalycium* include:

Gymnocalycium asterium (or *G. stellatum*) is a low growing brownish green to purple species. It is perfectly flat when dormant in the winter, but pumps up when in growth to a depressed globular species. It has great spines and great color.

Gymnocalycium bayrianum is one of the best spined species. The body is green, sometimes turning reddish in very strong light.

Gymnocalycium damsii is small clustering species. The stems are brownish green, and heavily marked, with the *Gymnocalycium* chin very evident. It produces bright pink flowers almost continuously during the year.

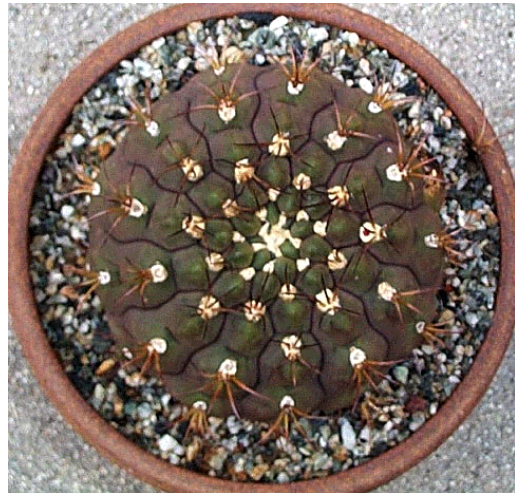
Gymnocalycium erinaceum is a dark green clustering species. It has short, dense spines, that are dark brown as they leave the gray-white areole, and then fade near the end to the same color as the areole wool. It makes for a very handsome appearance.

Gymnocalycium friedrichii is sometimes combined with *G. mihanovichii*, and sometimes kept as a separate species. It is an extremely popular species, and easily grown. The ribs are very prominent, and sharp. The body is a dark reddish brown, banded when young. There are a number of readily distinguished varieties and cultivars available. *G. mihanovichii* tends to be greener. *G. mihanovichii* is the source of the “red caps” seen in many garden centers and plant sales. These are chlorophyll-less and variegated forms, that must be grafted onto a green stock plant.

Gymnocalycium horstii is a large species, growing to 10 inches or so around. It will eventually cluster.

Gymnocalycium occultum is another small low growing species. It is olive green to brown with brilliant white flowers.

Gymnocalycium ragonesi is a well known and readily available species. It stays small, and varies in color from brick red to gray to greenish brown. It is very flat, and in the wild would grow almost completely buried.



Gymnocalycium zeggare

Gymnocalycium zeggare has been reduced to a variety of *Gymnocalycium pflanzii*, but is still often found under its old name. It is globular, and grows to about 4 inches in diameter. When well lit, the top of the plant turns a dark purple, fading to red, to finally the dull green of the sides.

References:

- Britton and Rose, **The Cactaceae**
- Cullman, Gotz and Groner, **The Encyclopedia of Cacti**
- Pilbeam, J., **Gymnocalycium, A Collector's Guide**
- Preston-Mafham, **Cacti, The Illustrated Dictionary**
- Innes, C. and Glass, C., **Cacti**