

San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

Cacti of the Month January 2002 - *Hook Spined Mammillaria*



***Mammillaria bombycina* entered in the 2001 Intercity Show by Laverne Pitzer**

A *Mammillaria* is often one of the first cacti that a beginning grower buys. They were available for 29 cents in Woolworths (remember Woolworths?) and are still available often for less than a dollar in discount stores, and for just a bit more at local home centers and discount stores. A credit to the toughness of these plants, is that many survive for years in spite of all sorts of abuse and neglect. Many inexpensive purchases at local chain stores have been grown on to become show plants, the quality of the plant maturing with the skill and experience of the grower. In part because they are so generous with flowers and seeds, and the seeds germinate so readily, many rare species end up in unlikely places like home centers, supermarkets, and hardware stores. It's worth keeping an eye out for unusual specimens, but beware of names found on discount store plants.

Mammillaria is one of the larger genera in the *Cactus* family, and one of the most variable, with some members remaining as solitary columns for their entire lives, some remaining as

fingernail size solitary globulars, some straight spined, and some clumped and heavily spined with hooks. Although the hooked spined species give the genus one of its common names, "fishhook cactus", they are not as often grown as the straight spined species. They are not as friendly either, with the hooks catching on skin and clothes, and pieces of stem coming off, when least expected.

Although most *Mammillaria* are native to Mexico, some species in the genus can be found from Columbia to Kansas and California. With this wide distribution, the cultivation requirements obviously vary considerably. The species from the tropics and warmer areas are rarely tolerant of cold and damp. Those from the drier desert regions are also intolerant of continued damp, but can take considerable cold. With these restrictions aside, most *Mammillaria* are easy to grow.

The secrets to good growth are a continued supply of fertilizer during the growing season, strong light, and maintenance of a clean and insect free growing environment. The appearance of white mealy bug egg cases (*Mammillaria's* worst enemy) on the tips of the spines or the appearance of ants means that mealy bugs are sucking the sap and life of the plant. Immediate treatment is required, with a thorough washing, and spraying with an insecticide. A less toxic solution is to soak the entire plant in soapy water overnight.

Propagation of Hooked Spined *Mammillaria* is easy. Cuttings can be taken at any time during the growing season (April to early November), left to dry for a few days and replanted in a clean potting mix. Rooting is rapid, with short

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white roots generally appearing after a couple of weeks. *Mammillaria* are one of the easiest species to grow from seed. The seeds are simply placed on top of a damp potting mix, covered with a light coating of gravel, placed in a plastic bag in bright light, but out of direct sun and allowed to germinate. Germination usually occurs in a week or 10 days. The seedlings can stay in the plastic bag for several weeks until they get large enough to survive unprotected, and should then be removed to a still shaded, but brighter and drier environment. Most will survive, and grow quickly.

Mammillaria to get hooked on:



Mammillaria aurihamata

Mammillaria aurihamata, shown above has golden hooked spines on a glossy green body. From San Luis Potosi, Mexico

Mammillaria bombycina is the classic hooked spined Mam. Beautiful dark spines are set off by the white wool. From Jalisco, Mexico. It is easy to grow, and clumps quickly forming an impressive plant in just a few years.

Mammillaria guelzowiana has light brown spines on a loosely tubercled, and very woolly body. It has large lavender flowers, and is a rapid clumper. From Durango, Mexico.

Mammillaria occidentalis from central Mexico, has a dark brown body with dark brown to black spination. It forms dense sprawling clumps of finger thick stems.

Mammillaria perrezdelarosae, is a small plant discovered only in 1985. It is a beautiful species.

Mammillaria senilis has dense white spines, giving an impression of a white haired body, and thus its name. This is one of the *Mammillaria* with large red flowers, different than the small cups of most others.

Mammillaria thornberi is another of the dark spined, dark stemmed species. It forms dense clumps. Stems are easily detached from the main body, hooking easily on clothes, and skin; this is probably one of its principal means of propagation in habitat. From Sonora, Mexico.

References:

- E. Anderson, **The Cactus Family**
- J. Pilbeam, **Cactus for the Connoisseur**
- R. Craig, **The Mammillaria Handbook**
- A. Innes & C. Glass **Cacti**

Tom Glavich December 2001