

San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

Cactus of the Month June 2002 - *Thelocactus*



Thelocactus lausseri

Thelocactus are spectacularly beautiful cacti with dense multicolor spination, well shaped tubercles, and large colorful flowers. They have been a favorite with collectors since they were first discovered.

Thelocactus is a small genus in the cactus family, with only 11 or 12 species. In addition to the species, there are also half a dozen legitimate varieties, and a large number of less legitimate varieties that can be found in reference books and collections. The larger number of questionable varieties is due to variability of some of the species between populations from isolated locations. This in turn driven by the large geographical range with variable micro-climates.

Thelocactus are found from Southern Texas through central Mexico, mostly in the Chihuahuan Desert, but extending into brushland and thorn scrub in the western parts of its range, and into the Rio Grande Plains region in Texas. *Thelocactus bicolor* has the largest range, extending from central Chihuahua in the west into Texas in the north, and as far south as San Luis Potosi.

Thelocactus are easily grown, tolerant of heat & moisture, but not cold & moisture. They benefit from protection from being cold and wet, although plants left unprotected during the last several winters survived in good shape. Some species develop fairly large tap roots, and should be planted in deep enough pots to give them room to grow. They are easily propagated from seed, and this is the best way to develop a good collection from different populations. They can also be propagated from offsets, with a cutting allowed to dry, and then replanted. They are sensitive to mealy bug infestations and spider mites, in the same way that all cacti are, but in general are fairly rugged plants.

Thrilling Thelos:

Thelocactus bicolor var. bicolor is found over the full range, as described above. It generally has dense spines that are red and white, yellow and with, reddish purple and white, etc. depending on the locality. Although generally solitary, it clumps with age. In habitat, it is usually 2 to 6 inches high, and can grow to 5 inches in diameter.

Thelocactus bicolor var. commodus is smaller, with sparsely spaced spines.

Thelocactus bicolor var. pottsii has thicker spines, white at the center, purple in the middle of the spine, and white at the tip. The spines are longer than v. *commodus*, and just interlace.

Thelocactus bicolor var. tricolor can be found in some collections, but it is identical to the type.

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Thelocactus conothelos var. argenteus has dense thin spines and generally purple flowers. It's a geographically isolated species, known from only one locality east of La Ascension, Nuevo Leon. It is a beautiful species.

Thelocactus heterochromus has spination more typical of a *Ferocactus*, and was transferred to *Ferocactus* by E.F. Anderson. It has also been an *Echinocactus*, to which it also has some resemblance. In many ways *Thelocactus* is the intermediate between the tubercular *Mammillaria* and *Esobaria* and the ribbed *Echinocactus* and *Ferocactus*. It has distinct tubercles as *Mammillaria*, but often has them in distinct ribs like *Ferocactus* or *Echinocactus*. *Thelocactus heterochromus* is intermediate between the two largest species, *T. bicolor* and *T. hexaedrophorus*. An interesting species from Durango.



T. hexaedrophorus v. hexaedrophorus entered in the 2001 IC show by D. & E. Tufenkian (Photo T. Nomer)

Thelocactus hexaedrophorus Has the best tubercles of any of the *Thelocactus*, and is a must for any collection. It eventually grows to about 6 inches in diameter, and a little taller. It has gray-green, olive-green, to bluish-gray skin, with sparse dark spines.



Thelocactus macdowellii entered in the 2002 IC show by Petra Crist (Photo T. Nomer)

Thelocactus macdowellii is a small clumping species from Coahuila, north of Monterey. It has dense white spination, and looks different from most of the other *Thelocactus*.

Thelocactus rinconensis has the largest body of all the species, getting to 8 inches in diameter in cultivation and habitat. There are several varieties found, the most popular being *T. rinconensis var. nidulans* which has long gray spines on an olive gray body, with yellow wool on the upper areoles.

References

- John Pilbeam, ***Thelocactus***
- Cullman, Gotz & Groner, **The Encyclopedia of Cacti**
- T. Anderson, **The Cactus Family**

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