

San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

Cactus of the Month July 2002 - *Melocactus*

A *Melocactus* was very likely the first cactus seen by an European explorer, and certainly one of the first to be brought back and successfully grown. They were known in English collections by the late 16th century, less than 60 years after Columbus' first voyage. It's likely that he or other early explorers also brought back some *Opuntia*, and much more likely that the *Opuntia* survived.



Melocactus azureus entered by W. Minnich in the 1998 SGVCSS Show

Melocactus are immediately recognizable by the large cephalium that develops on mature plants. *Melocactus* grow as normal appearing, but flowerless, globular cacti until they reach maturity. This can take from 6 to 15 years in cultivation, with a greater range in habitat. Once they reach maturity, the body stops growing vigorously (it still grows slowly). Most of the plant energy goes into producing a cylindrical flowering and fruiting structure known as a cephalium. This is usually white, with short hairs of yellow, orange or red. As the years go by, the cephalium becomes more cylindrical, with the base becoming more colorful. The flowers are usually a red-purple,

and the fruits are almost always a bright red, to attract birds. With age, the cephalium can grow to 18 inches or more in height, occasionally bifurcating or trifurcating.

Melocactus are native to a large region, Brazil to Southern Mexico, including a good part of the Caribbean. As might be expected, cacti from the tropical regions, particularly coastal regions are sensitive to cold and wet. Cold and wet conditions can cause scarring of the body, which usually appears as brown or tan lesions on the skin. A few of these are unavoidable, but a badly scarred plant quickly becomes unsightly. At the same time, almost all of the *Melocactus* expect high humidity, and a higher moisture level than might be expected. Many grow within sight of the ocean, or in some of the more tropical and humid regions of Brazil. They like water, but demand good drainage.



Melocactus griseoloviridis entered in the 1998 SGVCSS Show

Melocactus are generally solitary, so the only means of propagation is through seeds. Fortunately they produce plenty of seed, and these germinate readily, particularly when the

San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

Cactus of the Month July 2002 - *Melocactus*

weather is warm. Keep the seedlings protected from direct sun, and moist until fairly large. Although it is several years from seed to a flowering plant, most of the *Melocactus* have magnificent spination and vividly colored bodies, which make keeping them a pleasant task.



Melocactus disciformis entered in the 1998 Orange County Show

Magnificent Melos:

Melocactus azureus can vary in color from gray to green, but almost all of the plants in cultivation live up to the species name. They are bright blue. This species, when mature, with a rusty red cephalium crowned with a white top and bright red fruits is always a show stopper. From Bahia Brazil, it is also one of the easier species to grow.

Melocactus intortus is a species from the West Indies that becomes partly cylindrical with age, sometimes reaching to 3 feet in habitat. The body is also nicely pattered, with the tubercles being more distinct than on most *Melocactus*, and giving a distinct shape to the ribs.

Melocactus matanzanus is a species from Cuba. The cephalium has bright orange to reddish brown bristles. It stays small, rarely getting to more than a few inches tall. An interesting species from an island whose succulents plants are not well known.

Melocactus oaxacensis is from Mexico, as the name implies. It is a dull green, with a red cephalium. The cephalium tends to the brownish, giving this a different appearance than many of the other species. The flowers are larger than many of the other species.

Melocactus paucispinus, another species from Bahia Brazil is subglobose to strongly depressed. (much wider than tall). This species has prominent gray-green ribs, long, fat, gray spines, and a small cephalium. Although not the most showy of the species, it is certainly one of the most interesting.

Melocactus violaceus is a dark green bodied species, usually small and subglobose. The spines are whit, the fruit range from pale pink to lilac pink, giving the plant its name.

References

Cacti Clive Innes & Charles Glass
The Cactus Family Edward Anderson

Tom Glavich June 2002
Pictures by T. Nomer