

San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

Cactus of the Month August 2003 – *Discocactus*

Discocactus are heavily ribbed Brazilian cacti. The genus is quite old, first described in 1837. The name comes from the shape of the body, which tends to be much flatter than tall, at least compared to the other ball like genera (*Parodias* etc.) that share its habitat. *Discocactus* can be found inland in the state of Minas Gerais, and further South in the states of Sao Paulo, Parana, Mato Grosso, and crossing into Paraguay, and even into the Southeastern most state of Bolivia, Santa Cruz. Although popular in cultivation, many of the species are endangered in the wild.

The beautiful spination, the flat bodies, and the pleasantly fragranced flowers have made this a popular genus, and there are far more names in cultivation than there are true species. The number of species has varied from more than 60 down to 24 in recent publications (1990s), to the currently recognized 7. This is unlikely to be the last word on this attractive genus, so keep your old labels, they may soon be good again. In our shows, most of the generic names are accepted.

The distinguishing characteristics of *Discocactus* are globular to flattened globular shape, a cephalium, and fragrant night blooming flowers. The cephalia stay relatively small, are almost always white, and have long soft wool. *Discocactus* have ring-meristems (a ring of growth cells) that surround the cephalium, and allow the body to continue to grow after the cephalium forms. This growth ring distinguishes *Discocactus* from *Melocactus*.

In habitat, *Discocactus* grow in rocky soil, often protected by nurse shrubs. The soil contains the decaying remains of shrubs, bromeliads, lichen, and other organic matter. The humidity is high, particularly during the growing season. They

suffer from cold, and particularly cold and wet.

Discos to dance for:

Discocactus horstii is without a doubt the best of the genus. It flowers when small, as little as 2 inches across. The cephalium is particularly hairy, and the fragrant flowers can be more than 2 inches in diameter, larger than the body of the plant when young. It is unfortunately one of the harder to grow. It rots easily, from the roots up. There are a number of *D. horstii* hybrids that also flower well, and are easier to keep alive.

Discocactus magnimammus is a larger plant, making a more flattened globe. The ribs are subdivided into large rounded tubercles (thus its name). It has short light brown, curved spines, and a cotton like cephalium.

Discocactus zehntneri has two subspecies. *D. zehntneri ssp. zehntneri* is densely covered with spines, and looks little like the *Discocactus bueneckeri*.

References:

Britton and Rose, **The Cactaceae**
Cullman, Gotz and Groner, **The Encyclopedia of Cacti**
Edward Anderson **The Cactus Family**
Innes, C. and Glass, C., **Cacti**

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