

# San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

## Cactus of the Month October 2001 – *Ariocarpus*, *Astrophytum*, *Aztekium*

*Ariocarpus*, *Astrophytum* and *Aztekium* are three treasures of the botanical world. Remarkably, they all come from the same general geographical area ranging from North Central Mexico to Southern Texas.



***Ariocarpus fissuratus***

*Ariocarpus*, from Central to Northern Mexico and Southern Texas has some of the most spectacular species of the entire cactus family. Some succulent growers, who otherwise avoid cacti, make this genus their sole exception. There are collectors who collect nothing but *Ariocarpus*, and have hundreds of plants in their collections. Rare specimens can change hands for hundreds of dollars. This single genus has a world wide cult of devotees.

With all of this, you might expect *Ariocarpus* to be difficult to come by, and difficult to grow. Nothing could be further from the truth. They are no more difficult to grow than many other central Mexican genera. All of the species and all of the varieties are readily available, and nearly all are affordable. This genus is well within the range of novice growers.

*Ariocarpus* have important ethno-botanical uses. The tubercles have sticky mucilage, and this was often used as glue to mend broken pots. *A. kotschoubeyanus* was boiled and used as a cure for rheumatism, and several species were used as ‘false peyote’ in religious ceremonies.

Cultivation is easy, if attention is paid to the native environment of these plants. They grow in mineral soils, with very little organic matter. All have large tuberous roots. They grow in areas that are very hot in the summer, and that have summer rainfall. They need to be protected from excess organic matter, particularly peat, and watered heavily when in growth in hot weather. They should get protection from winter rains. There are six species, several varieties, and a near infinite set of cultivars.



***Astrophytum myriostigma* cv. “Onzuka”**  
Plant, Woody Minnich (Photo T. Nomer)

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*Astrophytum* are often one of the first cacti a collector starts with. They are inexpensive, easily grown cacti found in discount stores, groceries, and home centers, and staples of the sales tables at our shows. At the same time, growing a perfect, 10 or 20 year old specimen plant is a challenge few growers can master. Fortunately, the genus offers rewards and surprises at every level between, making it one of the most popular of cacti at all levels.

One of the cultivation difficulties with *Astrophytum* is their tendency to split open from sudden increases in soil moisture level. To avoid this, keep them in a soil that is very quick to drain, and which has little organic matter. A mixture of pumice and gravel or very coarse sand, with only a little organic matter is best for these plants. The same mix as that used for *Ariocarpus* is ideal. Start watering slowly when coming out of dormancy

There are currently four recognized species; however, there are older plants, clearly visibly different from the recognized species available in the trade. There are also varieties of the species, cultivars, and hybrids, all worth growing.

The Japanese in particular have developed some spectacular clones of *A. asterias*, *A. asterias* “Super Kabuto” and *A. asterias* “Miracle Kabuto”. These were developed by careful selection and propagation of selected clones and seedlings.



***Aztekium ritteri***

*Aztekium* is a genus of two species, one found recently. *Aztekium ritteri* is the smaller, better known, and more frequently seen species. It is difficult to keep on its own roots, and is usually seen as a graft. Plants grown on their own roots look different, with much better color than grafted plants. They are slow, cliff dwellers, and rot if given too much moisture. *Aztekium hintonii*, discovered in 1991, is larger, with very pronounced ribs.

Grafted plants are easily grown, with growth determined by the stock plant. Since *Aztekium* are slow growing plants, they live happily as grafts for many years.

### References:

- Anderson, E. **The Cactus Family**
- Cullman, Gotz and Groner, **The Encyclopedia of Cacti**
- Preston-Mafham, **Cacti, The Illustrated Dictionary**
- Innes, C. and Glass, C., **Cacti**