

San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

Succulent of the Month February 2001 - *Echeveria*



Figure *Echeveria subrigida* grown by Marilyn Henderson from the 2000 Inter City Show

Echeveria, along with *Dudleya*, *Pachyphthum*, and *Sedum* is one of the principal members of the succulent New World *Crassulaceae*. *Echeveria* come principally from the mountains of Eastern Mexico, although there are plants found from Texas into South America. Venezuela has a significant population.

The genus *Echeveria* is named after Atanasio Echeverria, an illustrator of a projected *Flora Mexicana* prepared under the direction of Martin Sesse, from 1789 to 1803. Martin Sesse received a Royal Patent for a botanical expedition to Mexico from Charles III, King of Spain in 1788. Charles III was one of the most enlightened of the late 18th century kings, with widespread cultural and scientific interests. Unfortunately, he died shortly after giving the Patent, and before supplying any money. His son, Charles IV, was not enlightened, not particularly bright, and unlucky. He lost Spain to Napoleon, and spent the last years of his life in exile in Rome. Sesse went on with the expedition, and although chronically short of funds, and often sick and hungry, with Jose Mocino, Atanasio Echeverria, and others,

collected hundreds of plants over a 15 year period. The three returned to Spain, expecting to become famous and publish their *Flora Mexicana*, only to be ignored by the King. Sesse returned to his land holdings; Mocino went to work at the Museum of Natural History in Madrid, and Echeverria was hired as an artist's assistant.

Mocino sent the original drawings to the famous botanist Alphonse De Candolle as Napoleon marched on Madrid. The originals were lost in the confusion of the Napoleonic wars, but the drawings were saved by Alphonse De Candolle, who hired 120 draftsmen to work for 10 days making several sets of precise tracings of Echeverria's drawings. De Candolle also named the genus in a lecture in 1827, first publishing it in 1928.

Coming from mountainous regions, *Echeveria* prefer well drained soil, and good ventilation. They also prefer cooler temperatures, looking their best in late winter and early spring. The plants swell with the winter rains, and as growth starts the colors become more intense. Although they don't go completely dormant in summer, growth slows, and in the inland valleys, plants tend to wilt and sulk, even with some shade. In California, the best *Echeveria* growers tend to live near the coast, and near San Francisco.

Propagation of *Echeverias* is a required skill rather than an optional one. All *Echeveria* have leaves that dry and fall off as they age, leaving a thick, and usually ugly stem. With time, most *Echeverias* offset between the older leaves. These offsets can be removed, the bottom-most leaves of the offset removed, and the stem and remaining leaves planted as soon as the cut

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stem is dry. Successful rooting almost always follows. The terminal rosette should also be periodically removed and restarted in the same way, with all the dead and the older live leaves removed. The old stem can be kept for awhile, as it frequently offsets from the top or side, and these offsets can be removed as well and propagated. *Echeverias* have flowers on an extended stalk (raceme). The raceme has small leaves on it, and occasionally, rosettes. These will root easily as well.

Echeveria make wonderful landscape plants, and mass use of these are highlights of the gardens at the Huntington and the Getty Museum. The Huntington takes pains to keep the plants out of a formal geometric pattern. The Getty does the reverse, fitting in better with the architecture and design of the gardens at this site. Both are worth seeing. The same plants are used to very different effect.

Favorite species include:

Echeveria agavoides, forms large light green rosettes, with red tips when grown in full sun. Two popular cultivars are "Lipstick" which has red edges and "Ebony" which has dark red-purple edge. The colors are enhanced by sunlight.

Echeveria elegans is a smaller species with pale green leaves that makes an excellent bedding plant.

Echeveria lilacina is a grayed purple color. The color is due to a waxy coating. Healthy growth and freedom from spotting is achieved by keeping the leaves free from water. It grows to about 8 inches in diameter, and is one of the most beautiful of the species.

Echeveria purpusorum is a small slow growing species from Southern Mexico. It has short stiff white-green leaves, with dark edges and small red spots.

Echeveria runyonii is known only from cultivated plants, and one of the more interesting blue-gray species.

Echeveria subrigida, shown above, is one of the white glaucous species. The one shown was grown to perfection, with great care taken to keep the leaves free from spotting by water.

Echeveria have also been hybridized frequently, and many interesting plants are available.

Echeveria 'Blue Curls' is really more green than blue with a pink edge.

Echeveria 'Arlie Wright' is a large cultivar that is a beautiful burgundy color when grown in full sun.

Echeveria 'Topsy Turvy' is a medium sized plant with leaves peaked in the center.

References

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Tom Glavich January 2001