

San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

Succulent of the Month August 2003 - *Medusoid Euphorbia*

The myth of Medusa is very old, and predates Greek Mythology. Medusa's character changes with culture, social conditions and time. The best known story comes from late Greek Mythology; where Medusa was a mortal woman, descended from the gods, whose beauty was so renowned that she fancied herself more beautiful than the god Athena. As punishment (or in revenge), Athena turned Medusa's hair to snakes, and placed a curse on her so that any living being looking at her was turned to stone. Although no one turns to stone, the first sight of Medusoid *Euphorbias* often stops viewers at our shows. The Medusoids are among the most unusual of the *Euphorbias*, and have no close parallel in other genera.

The Medusoid *Euphorbias* are easily identified. A (usually) large body is covered with arms. The arms may be stubby and widely spaced (*Euphorbia decepta*), or they may be long, snakelike and closely spaced (*Euphorbia caput-medusae*). For all of the Medusoid *Euphorbias*, the central thickened stem is really a caudex. It is a central storage region, and can act as a reservoir for nutrients and moisture in times of stress. Many of the Medusoids will shed their arms (branches) during extended droughts, re-growing new ones when the rains return.

In our shows, we generally have classes for Medusoid and Caudiciform *Euphorbias*. The medusoids are really a subset of the caudiciforms, and compete best against similar cylindrical or spherical species rather than the odd shaped caudiciforms. The *Euphorbias* with all of the branches coming from a small area in the top are generally entered as in the caudiciform classes.



Euphorbia arida entered in the 2003 CSSA show by Petra Crist

Medusoid *Euphorbias* come from a wide range of habitats, with Cape Province, South Africa being Medusoid central; but all go through extended periods of low moisture. Cultivation for many is relatively easy; as long as attention is paid to not watering during periods of dormancy. There are generally two periods of dormancy, a long one during the late fall and winter (mid November through the end of February) and a shorter one during the peak of the summer heat (a few weeks in August and September). The arrival of the summer one is harder to predict, and over-watering in late summer can result in root rot. In spite of the sensitivity, most of the Medusoid *Euphorbias* do well as unprotected pot plants outdoors in Southern California during the winter.

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Euphorbia albertensis first prize winner in the Medusoid *Euphorbia* Category in the 2003 CSSA Show (entered by P. Crist)

It's nearly impossible to find seed for most of the Medusoid *Euphorbias*, and in general, the seed is short lived (months). Vegetative propagation is easier. Most Medusoid *Euphorbias* can be propagated from arm cuttings, although an extended period will be required before the plant is worth of showing.

Marvelous Medusoids:

Euphorbia caput-medusae is the classic species. It is from Cape Province, with a caudex of up to 8 inches in diameter. The branches are long and serpentine. It's the most snake like of all the species.

Euphorbia decepta is from Cape Province South Africa. The caudex is 2 to 4 inches thick, and the branches generally less than an inch long. In habitat, the branches are deciduous, but in

cultivation they stay on the plant all year. Seedlings of this plant look like World War II floating mines.

Euphorbia flanaganii is one of the most common and easily grown of the medusoids. The central caudex is generally two or three inches across. It grows quickly, offsets readily, and can rapidly fill a large bowl with Medusoid plants.

Euphorbia fortuita comes from Ladismith in Cape Province. It has a tuberous main root that merges into the main caudex, and stiff cylindrical branches usually about 4 inches long, but occasionally one will be twice as long.

Euphorbia gorgonis - another species from Cape Province near Grahamstown. The caudex is mostly subterranean. It has short tuberculate branches, that turn red in strong light. The name of this species is an extension of the medusa myth. Medusa was one of the three Gorgon sisters. In an earlier version of the myth all three had snakelike hair and wings. When Perseus beheaded Medusa, the two remaining Gorgon sisters chased after him as he flew across Africa.

Euphorbia woodii is from Natal, but similar to ***Euphorbia flanaganii*** in appearance. Most of the caudex and a large turnip like root are subterranean.

References

H. Jacobsen, **A Handbook of Succulent Plants**
H. Schwartz ed. **Euphorbia Journal**
Sajeva and M. Costanzo, **Succulents, The Illustrated Dictionary**

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