

San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

Cacti of the Month January 2001 - *Gymnocactus* and *Ortegocactus*

Gymnocactus and *Ortegocactus* are often grouped together in shows because of their similar size and growth habits. *Ortegocactus* is a monotypic genus (one species) from Oaxaca. *Gymnocactus* is a small genus of small plants from Northeastern and Central Mexico. It has been an unstable genus, moved into both *Neolloydia* and *Turbiniacarpus* in the very recent past. Many references will have the plants we know as *Gymnocactus* moved listed as species of either of the other two genera.



Figure *Gymnocactus viereckii*

Gymnocactus are not difficult to grow. They require very strong light, and are sensitive to over watering. The challenge with *Gymnocactus* is not growing them, but growing them too well. In habitat, these plants live in cracks in rocks, on cliff faces, so they get very little nutrients, and grow nearly free of organic matter. The only naturally occurring organic matter will be leaves blown around and getting caught on the spines. These should be grown in a very open mineral mix, (lots of pumice).

Great Gymnocactus:

Gymnocactus beguinii has several forms, but is generally a small, often solitary plant. It has a medium green body, nearly hidden by dense white to gray spines.

Gymnocactus subterraneus is from Tamaulipas Mexico. As its name implies it has (in habitat) most of its body mass below the ground, or safely hidden between cracks in rocks. It has a large tuber, is sensitive to over watering. It has a dark green skin, generally with black central and white radial spines. The bodies are typically only an inch or so across, and are often elongated, as they would be in habitat. The flowers are a light pink to light purple and almost the same size as the body. A variety from Zaragosa in Nuevo Leon, *Gymnocactus subterraneus v. zaragosae* appears to grow out of near vertical gypsum cliffs. In habitat, drainage is very good, and nutrients are few.

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Gymnocactus viereckii is another species from Tamaulipas. The species offsets well, and clumps with many heads can be produced relatively quickly. (but still slowly compared to a *Mammillaria*) The radial spines are white, the areoles are woolly, and the central spines are black, giving a very showy plant. The heads are more globular than *Gymnocactus subterraneus*, giving this a more normal cactus appearance.



Figure *Ortegocactus macdougallii*

Ortegocactus macdougallii is the only species. It is an easy plant to grow, but for best (tight round heads), it needs nearly full sun. The light green skin belies its toughness, and many growers put it in too protected a location. It tends to get an unsightly reddish spotting. Some clones seem to be more susceptible than others,. Active growth seems to keep the spotting to a minimum.

References

Cullman, Gotz & Groner **The Encyclopedia of Cacti**
Preston-Mafham, Rod & Ken Cacti, **The Illustrated Dictionary**
Clive Innes and Charles Glass, **Cacti**