

# San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

## Cactus of the Month May 2001 – *Epiphytic Cacti*

Epiphytic Cacti are those cacti that prefer to live in trees. They will also live on rocks, cliff faces, etc., wherever they can get a foothold to establish roots, and good air flow. Almost all epiphytic cacti are tropical, but most can take considerable cold, and do well outdoors, unprotected in Southern California. They all require less light than their terrestrial cousins, making them ideal for the shady corner where other succulent prefer not to grow. They also do well hanging from trees.

Epiphytic cacti have also been primary subjects of hybridization, almost since their discovery. At the turn of the 19th century, and early years of the 20th there were spectacular hybrids created in England and Germany. Many of these were lost during the World Wars due to lack of heat and bomb damage to greenhouses. Epiphyllums in particular have again become the subject of hybridizers, with many hybrids being created in Southern California and others in Japan and Australia.

Epiphytic cacti care is somewhat different than terrestrial cacti. Almost all require a richer potting mixture than terrestrial plants. Good drainage is still a must, but more organic matter is better. Many growers use a mixture of regular cactus mix and fir bark.

Propagation is by seed or by cuttings. Seed is easily obtained from your own plants, but relatively hard to find in regular seed sources. Epiphytic cacti generally have fleshy fruits. The seed is removed, cleaned and allowed to dry. It germinates easily in the spring. Cuttings of most genera are the normal method of propagation. Cuttings are allowed to dry

for a day or two, and then simply put into potting mix. Rooting and growth is very rapid. Mid spring (April and May) are generally when growth is most rapid. Rooting cuttings is easiest at this time of year, although any time generally works.

Excellent Epiphytes:

Aporocactus are thin stemmed trailing cactus, often know as "Rat Tails". The species generally found is Aporocactus flagelliformis, covered with red flowers in early summer. This species has been used as the basis of some hybrids, and has been hybridized into Epiphyllum to give it it's red color.

Disocactus is a genus from Honduras and Guatemala. It has flat leaf-like stems. Well worth growing, for the delicate flowers, it's fussy, and a challenge. The culture is really more suitable to those with an Orchid Greenhouse.

Epiphyllum species are available, but not often grown. They all have white flowers, opening at night. This genus has been the basis of an extraordinary amount of hybridization, with many other genera used to create an wealth of color forms and sizes. There are entire societies based on this genus alone. Red is the most common hybrid color, but purple, peach, yellow, white, and striped, iridescent forms are all available. They flower in April through July, depending on the hybrid, with isolated flowers appearing all year.

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*Hatiora salicornioides* is one of four plants of the genus *Hatiora*, and the only one commonly seen. It has a common name "Drunkard's Dream" because each stem segment looks like a small beer bottle. It is easy to grow, and has orange flowers in April.



*Hatiora salicornioides*

*Hylocereus trigonus* is occasionally found as the stock for grafted plants, particularly the more garish *Gymnocalycium*s such as "red cap". It is cold sensitive, and the grafts usually rot during the first cold and damp spell. The top can be cut off, and the stock will survive and grow. It's a fast growing climbing plant, and does well climbing a trellis. It has large white flowers, but needs to be several feet tall before they appear.

*Rhipsalis* is a large genus, with over 65 species, exhibiting an amazing diversity in form.

*Rhipsalis baccifera* is the only species of cacti found native to Africa and Madagascar as well as South America. Seeds were probably carried across the Atlantic stuck to (or in) a bird. *Rhipsalis* flowers are white, small, and insignificant. The berries that come after, light

green to white, are far more showy.

*Rhipsalis mesembryanthemoides* is a plant with short stubby leaves, looking as if its name implies more like a mesemb than a cactus.

*Rhipsalis pentaptera* has 5 notched angles. It often twists into exaggerated shapes.

*Rhipsalis crispata* has flat leaves, looking as much like an *Opuntia* as an epiphyte.

*Schlumbergeria* is a genus extensively hybridized as a Christmas Cactus. The complex small flowers are borne in profusion. Various shades of red, pink and white are available. They flower in Southern California around Christmas, with no real effort required. Those living in Europe and the North East have extensive and complicated rituals to go through to get a good Christmas show. Vegetative propagation of these requires two stem segments. One goes in the soil, the other sticks up.

*Selenicereus* has some of the showiest flowers of all the cacti, and certainly the largest. *Selenicereus grandiflorus*, or "Queen of the Night" has flowers up to ten inches across. It comes from the Caribbean, and likes warmth and humidity. The flowers are a cream white, with yellow sepals. This is an aggressive plant, and needs lots of food to grow well and flower.

*Wittia* is a rarely seen genus from Panama, Columbia and Venezuela. Like *Disocactus* it is hard to grow, but the flowers are worth the challenge.