

San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

Cactus of the Month - March 2002 – *Copiapoa*

Copiapoa is a unique genus of spectacular plants from the north coast of Chile. The genus has no close relatives, and is confined to a region of ecological change, becoming steadily drier for the past several hundred years. The southern limit of *Copiapoa* is where reliable winter rains can be found. The northern limit is the tropical region of reliable summer rains. *Copiapoa* live along the coast and throughout the river valleys cut through the coastal mountains. Some of the species live completely on dense fogs that occur regularly for months at a time. The hills and valleys of northern Chile are still not well explored from a botanical point of view, and new species are still being described and additional species will be found in the future.



***Copiapoa krainziana* (Picture by T. Nomer)**

Given these extreme conditions, one would expect the cultivation of these plants in Southern California, with our frequent winter rains, fogs, and “June gloom” to be quite a challenge. Fortunately, this is not so, and *Copiapoa* are relatively easy to grow. They respond happily to the same potting mix, watering, and fertilization as most cacti, growing many times faster than they would in

habitat. Some species can even be grown in the open ground in the San Gabriel Valley, as long as the soil is well drained. They do tend to be slower growers than many.

Copiapoa are easily propagated from cuttings or division of clumps. Seed is available from the CSSA seed bank, and most cactus seed houses, and germinates quickly in the spring. They should be started in a moist potting soil, and moved to drier surroundings after germination.

Copiapoa were first collected in the 1840s, and described as *Echinocactus*, then the home of anything more or less globular. The genus *Copiapoa* was named by Britton and Rose in 1922 in their great work **The Cactaceae**. The name derives from Chilean province of Copiapo, home to many of the species.

All of the *Copiapoa* are worth growing. This is a genus unparalleled in excellent species.

Classic Copiapoa

Copiapoa cinerea In habitat this species is an ash-gray with black spines. They grow to 4 or 5 inches in diameter, and cluster. In cultivation, the body tends to stay greenish, but it remains a classic plant.

Copiapoa hypogaea is a dwarf species, clustering in habitat and cultivation. It is variable, and several named varieties exist, all worth growing. *C. hypogaea v. laui* is the smallest of the *Copiapoa*, growing to only 1/2 inch across. *C. hypogaea v. montana* has very woolly areoles, particularly when grown in cultivation.

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Copiapoa humilis is a widespread species, with many named varieties. It is one of the smaller species, easy to grow, and very common. All of the varieties are equally easy to grown and differ from the type (first to be found) of the species by variation in spination. *C humilis v. humilis* is a dark green with black spines; *v. longispina* is a lighter, green with white spines; *v. tenuissima* has woolly areoles; *v. tocopillana* is densely spined. All of these are worth collecting. The larger of the two heads shown in the picture below is less than an inch across.



Copiapoa humilis v. tenuissima

Copiapoa krainziana also known as *Copiapoa cinerea v. krainziana* is one of the most popular species. Easy to grow, with long white spines, and a woolly crown, it is really the most extreme of a very variable population.

Copiapoa marginata varies considerably in cultivation from native habitat. In habitat, the bodies are dark green, with white spines. The center growth tip is encased in wool. When grown in pots, this species tends to have darker spines on most of the body, with white spines only appearing on the oldest areoles at the bottom of the plant. The wool stays on the areoles (as long as water is kept off the top) giving the whole plant a fuzzy top. A beautiful plant, rarely seen.

Copiapoa solaris comes from the northern part of the range. It is a fairly large plant in habitat, forming clusters up to six feet cross and three feet high.

References:

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Preston-Mafham, Cacti, **The Illustrated Dictionary**
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