

San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

Succulent of the Month July 2002 - *Cissus* and *Cyphostemma*



Cyphostemma seitziana entered in the 2001 Intercity Show by Petra Crist
photo T. Nomer

Cissus and *Cyphostemma* are two closely related genera both in the *Vitaceae* or grape family. The members of both of these genera span the range of extremely easy to grow plants to real challenges. Most of the species will grow large, given time, good root room, lots of fertilizer, and water during the growing season. Both of these genera present some of the most striking pachycauls and caudexes of the entire plant world.

Most *Cissus* and *Cyphostemma* will set fruit. In most cases, the fruit is toxic to humans and most pets, although freely eaten by birds. The seeds in the fruit are ripe when the fruit turns color.

The key to success with these plants is to pay attention to the native habitat. *Cyphostemma juttae*, common in many collections, easily obtained, and often a show winner, comes from South Africa. It takes some frost with no damage, and grows in the ground in Southern California, putting on bulk and character in just a few years.

Cyphostemma seitziana, on the other hand comes from Namibia, and is much less tolerant of unprotected cold and over watering.

The exact relationship between the two genera was in dispute for most of the 19th and 20th centuries, and it's easy to find both generic names used for the same species in many references. As a general guideline, *Cyphostemma* tend to be pachycaul succulents from Africa, while *Cissus* is widespread throughout new and old world tropics. *Cissus* tend to be more vine like. There are exceptions to both of these, and the final determination needs to be made by detailed examination of the flowers.



Cissus quinata

Propagation of both genera is easy from cuttings and seeds. Seed of all the common and even some of the truly rare species is sometimes available through the CSSA or through some of the better South African and US seed dealers. The germination is erratic (days to months), and only one seed should be sown per pot. The seedling mix should be sterile and organic, and hold a lot of water. Scarring the seeds to allow water penetration

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helps. The seeds should be completely buried to provide uniform moisture. A plastic bag over the mix will help keep everything uniform. The bag should be removed as soon as any sign of green appears, the seedling leaves are large, and will rot if they touch the plastic. Softwood cuttings should be taken when active growth is occurring. Rooting does not require or even seem to benefit from hormones.



Cissus glabrum

Cyphostemmas to covet:

Cyphostemma betaformis is a Somalian species, relatively new to cultivation. Not particularly difficult to cultivate as long as warm conditions are given.

Cyphostemma currori is a Namibian species. It is easy to grow, and does well in the ground during the summer and fall, but needs to be removed to a pot for the winter.

Cyphostemma juttae is by far the commonest in cultivation. It is easy to grow, does well in the ground, and makes an impressive specimen in a short time.

Cyphostemma seitziana, shown on the previous page is one of the more tropical species. A bit harder to grow, it is sensitive to cold, and needs winter protection.

Cyphostemma uter is a large species, rarely seen in cultivation, with orange peeling bark. Although it comes from South Africa, it is hard to keep going in the ground and needs some winter protection.

Cissus to cultivate:

Cissus glabrum, shown left is an easy species to grow from seed. The vine spreads rapidly as the caudex develops, but it is easily pruned for show, or even trimmed back to the caudex at the end of the season.

Cissus quinata, shown on previous page has great colored leaves. It grows quickly, and needs lots of room to spread for best caudex development.

Cissus tuberosa may be the best of all the species. The caudex is usually round when seed grown, and usually elongate when grown from cuttings. In both cases they are excellent specimens.

References

Gordon Rowley **Caudiciform and Pachycaul Succulents**

Tom Glavich June 2002