

Gymnocalycium

Leo Martin

August 2001

Gymnocalycium are South American plants, exclusively from the eastern side of the Andes. Some are from inland areas, some from coastal Argentina and Brazil. The name means naked flower tube and, if you look at a bud, you will see smooth scales without a trace of hair or spines. They are globular plants, sometimes solitary, sometimes clumping, but never getting very large. Spinination can be sparse to ferocious.

Habitats range from grasslands to scrub to subtropical forest, generally from 1,500-3,500 feet in elevation; most are in the dry thorn forest zone call Chaco, with summer rainfall and clay soil. They seem to grow well for me in any soil, but I like using fine-particle granite soil dug from my garden, because there is no organic matter to break down and get rancid, and I don't have to repot until they've outgrown the pot. With proper watering and fertilizing, this can be just a year or two.

The green-bodied ones require some shading from Phoenix sun, growing under bushes or grasses in habitat. I grow them on the bottom shelf of two-shelf tables. Most of the brown-bodied ones take a lot more sun, but they haven't been happy with full Phoenix sun. I grow them on the sunny side of the bottom shelves so they get about a half-day's shade and half day's full sun. Most will not take any frost at all (*but they do fine under a canopy in winter*: Ed.).

They flower young, easily and often several times a season with flowers large for the size of the plant body. To ensure plenty of flowers, keep them moist during warm weather. I try not to let mine dry completely from the time they start growing in January or February until lit gets cold in mid-December. That's right; I don't let them dry out. I think they could almost stand in a dish of water during warm weather without trouble. They will easily survive drying out during warm weather, but growth will be halted for some weeks. If I had time, I would fertilize them weekly with full-strength fertilizer such as Peters or Miracle Grow at normal concentrations or, ammonium sulfate one tablespoon in a gallon of water.

They are easy to propagate from seed or from offsets kept moist until growing. Clones lacking chlorophyll, revealing the other pigments ranging from red to pink to brown, are often sold grated onto *Hylocereus undatus* stalks, the whole thing looking like a lollipop.

I like flowers. So, favorites have lots of flowers: *G. bruchii* is always the first to bloom in January. Some clones have flowers with a fragrance like roses. It clumps and fills a pot rapidly. It has small bodies, rarely more that two inches (5cm) in diameter, and has tiny and harmless spines with areoles arranged in tight lines, looking a little like a small Arizona rainbow cactus. *G. eurypleurum* blooms most of the summer with big white flowers that have a strange bluish luminosity. It offsets sparingly and many clones have just a few areoles with few, short, wavy brown spines. *G. mihanovichii* and kin are small solitary plants with prominent red and brown pigment and sharp angles to the ribs. They

flower when less than an inch in diameter and flower all summer on new growth. Flowers are anything from lime green to white to light to dark pink. The red, purple and orange lollipop grafted cacti are clones of this plant lacking chlorophyll, and can only be propagated by grafting. For those liking spines, search out *G. cardenasiatum*, now properly known as *G. spegazzini* subspecies *cardenasiatum*. The spines are very long and thick, often obscuring the body. Sometimes are wavy as well.

Some information came from *Gymnocalycium: A Collector's Guide* by John Pilbeam, A. A. Balkema publishers, Rotterdam, Netherlands, 1995.