

Mammillaria

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Mammillaria was first described as a genus by Haworth in 1812. It is a large genus, ranging from the United States to Venezuela and the Caribbean islands. The largest numbers occur in Mexico.

They are relatively small globular cacti, often clustering, with stems bearing small bumps called tubercles arranged into spirals rather than ribs. The tubercles were thought by Haworth to resemble nipples, thus the genus name, from Latin *mammilla* or nipple. The distinguishing characteristics from globular tuberculated cacti are the flowers arising from the axil (the cranny at the base of the tubercle), and the absence of a groove along the top surface of the tubercle. Grooved tubercles usually mark a plant as a *Coryphanta*. Many subgenera of *Mammillaria* exist with slightly differing flowers. Presence or absence of milky sap is an important identifying characteristic. Our local plant is *M. grahamii*, the older name for which *M. microparpa* is a synonym. Most *Mammillaria* have rings of small flowers in the late winter or early spring, borne just down the shoulder of the plant from the apex. A few produce flowers on and off during warm weather if watered adequately.

Some of the more interesting groups to collectors are:

- The Baja, California members of the former genus, now considered a subgenus, *Cochemiea*
- The small tuberous-rooted ones with huge magenta flowers like *M. hernandezii* or *M. saboae*
- And, of course, anything with big nasty spines like *M. rekoii* variety *leptacantha* or lots of flowers like *M. guelzowiana*, the largest-flowering plant in the genus, and lots of white hair to boot.

People in warm summer areas tend to lose *Mammillarias* during the hottest, most humid portion of the year. I seem to lose *M. bombycina* every 3-5 years, always during August. Most *Mammillarias* do better with a distinct dry and perhaps even somewhat shady rest during the entire monsoon season, until nights cool off. Many will shrivel terribly, but when nights cool down they perk up looking fine again. Most *Mammillarias* grow very fast from mid-January until May, and again from late October until mid-December. Flowers can be had all year on a collection of no more than 10 plants.

It is best to grow the Baja natives warm all year. They will tolerate temperatures below 40 degrees F (4.5 degrees C), but they don't like it. They don't mind water during the monsoon, because they often get the same rain but more of it. Sonoran Desert natives also can use summer water. These summer growers have some of the best flowers of the genus, subgenus *Cochemiea* has tubular red flowers in flushes all summer.

Mammillarias are propagated very easily from seed or from divisions of the clumping ones. I often have seedlings pop up in my pots under parent plants.

I plant *Mammillaria* in shallower and shallower pots each time I repot. Most have small root systems, growing in nature in cracks in rocks or in tiny pockets of soil. The group including *M. herandezii* grows on the surface of bare rocks where tiny amounts of leaf litter accumulate. Some of the really hard to grow species such as *M. humboldtii* and *M. hernandezii* have tiny feeder roots (though *M. hernandezii* does have a larger tuberous root). If planted in a pot that looks appropriate, the roots stay wet too long and the plant rots.

So, when repotting, pay attention to your plant. If it has a tiny root system, use a pot more like a bonsai dish and soil mix that will dry out fast. If you must put *M. humboldtii* into a large pot, try potting it first into a tiny pot then burying that pot in gravel inside the larger pot.