

Pilosocereus (Byles & G.D. Rowley)

Cactus and Succulent Journal of Great Britain 1966, 1957

Submitted by Leo A. Martin

Piloso = hairy; Cereus=candle. Pilosocereus are clumping columnar cacti from warm-winter regions of Brazil through southern Mexico; often cultivated because they are easy to grow; frequently have a beautiful blue skin; lots of white wool, or bright golden spines. They form a cephalium on one side of the stem toward the tip when ready to bloom, a zone with much denser wool to protect the developing bud from pests and weather. Nocturnal bat-pollinated flowers are usually fleshy to reddish.

They are very easy to grow. Many people start with seedlings or small cuttings. If you see a bluish cactus in a seedling flat at a store, especially if it has gold spines, it is probably a Pilosocereus.

They will grow anytime day temperatures are above about 70 degrees F, faster if warmer. Mine grow best during the hottest part of the year, so long as I keep them well-watered. This means, for me, almost daily watering during May through October. If they dry out for any length of time during the growing season, they stop growing for a while. They like full sun. In Brazil, they grow in full sun in areas that get summertime temperatures above 125 F and it is wet and humid all summer, and dry and warm all winter.

I pot them in plastic or ceramic pots to minimize evaporative loss through the pot. I use relatively small pots, 8" to 10," so I can pack them closer together in my growing area. Watch for top-heavy tipping. I use my standard local soil with no added potting soil or other organic matter. They enjoy heavy feeding, even with each watering, but they will grow very fast then. With irregular feeding and good watering, expect 1-2 feet or more of growth annually. Holding back on water or fertilizer will result in much less growth. My *P. chrysostele* bloomed at about six feet in 2000. I bought it as an eight inch rooted cutting in July 1997.

They don't like frost. In habitat, they would never see temperatures below 50 F. Ones surviving outside here tend to be planted against walls or right next to pools. The Mexican species take more cold than do the Brazilians.

Species commonly available include *P. chrysostele* ("golden column" in Greek) with dense soft golden spines; *P. leucocephalus* from Mexico, with lots of white wool; and *P. pachycladus*, with few ribs, the bluest skin, golden spines, and white wool. If you can find *P. magnificus*, get it. It truly is magnificent, with a blue body, few ribs and numerous short golden spines. B & B Cactus in Tucson sells an unidentified one that is really nice: very thin stems, around 1.5", extremely blue skin, and lots of white wool.