

Pterodiscus and Uncarina

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Pterodiscus, named by Hooker in 1844, and Uncarina, named by Stapf in 1895, are genera of tuberous plants in the sesame family, Pedaliaceae. Pterodiscus are from Africa and Uncarina from Madagascar. They both experience summer rains and winter drought. They have subterranean tubers which are often raised in cultivation. Pterodiscus has annual stems, and Uncarina are trees or shrubs, often trained into bonsai. Both produce hairy, sticky leaves. Flowers are generally large and attractive; from red through pink, yellow, and orange in Pterodiscus; yellow, pink or white in Uncarina.

Both genera are very easy to grow. Mine begin growth as soon as daytime temperatures warm up in February or March; sometimes even January. Once growth begins, I keep them constantly moist or flower buds drop. I use very large pots because they use so much water during our heat. For example, I would put newly-acquired plants from 2 inch pots directly into 8 inch or even 10 inch pots. Rapid growth of the tubers and plenty of flowers reward me. I use a mix of about 75% sand and silt and 25% plain potting soil. I also fertilize heavily; fertilizing with every watering would suit these plants fine.

As winter approaches, they drop their leaves if exposed to the weather, though plants kept warm will grow all year. They will tolerate temperatures near freezing but are frost-sensitive. Keep dry all winter and resume watering when weather warms.

Spider mites are a problem for Pterodiscus and white flies for Uncarina. Spider mites manifest during warm, dry weather (or artificial heat) as silvery cobwebs on the undersides of leaves, and whitish spotting on the surface of the leaf where the bug has sucked leaf cells dry. Infestations of spider mites kill Pterodiscus quickly. They are easily treated by spraying both leaf surfaces with plain water or rubbing alcohol every few days. Adult white flies themselves do not cause damage; nymphs suck on leaves, however. If adults are seen, nymphs can be seen as tiny yellowish bumps on the undersides of leaves. Treatment is spraying undersides of leaves with rubbing alcohol or soapy water to kill nymphs, and trapping adults with yellow paper or plastic smeared with Vaseline.

Individual Pterodiscus plants often produce the distinctive four-winged seed. The name means, "winged disk," which the seed does resemble. Uncarina require pollination, by beetles in habitat. If you wish to pollinate your own Uncarina plants, you must extract the pollen mass with a tweezers, squeeze it until the pollen squirts out, and then place it on the stigma of another plant. Uncarina seed pods are adapted to dispersal by large animals. They are covered with vicious hooks and are worse than jumping cholla stems. Be sure you know what you are doing if you handle them.