

## Stapeliads

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Milkweed relatives once in family Asclepiadaceae, are now lumped into Apocynaceae. Genera include *Caralluma*, *Edithcolea*, *Hoodia*, *Huernia*, *Pseudolithos*, *Stapelia*, *Trichocaulon*, among others. Native to warm regions, tolerating no frost except in a few species, they are accustomed to distinct seasonal temperature and water fluctuations. Many bloom in the fall.

Most are spreading stem succulents without leaves; some are upright, solitary or clumping. Flowers are five-pointed stars, from enormous (*S. gigantea*, the second-largest flower on Earth) to tiny. There is often a strong to overpowering fragrance of rotting organic material to the flower, which is part of the attraction to the flies and to the connoisseur. The black sheep of the family smell like honey or roses. There is a fascinating central floral structure best appreciated under magnification; it ensures only designated pollinators will carry out pollination. Seeds are borne in two-horned seed pods, in common with other ascleps, and have parachutes.

In habitat the small creepers are found under shrubs and colored solid green, not the red often seen in plants receiving more sun in collections. The parachute-aided seeds blow around until they lodge in the debris at the foot of a shrub or tree. The stems creep out from there, forming a skirt under the tree or shrub.

The larger, more upright ones (*Hoodia*, *Edithcolea*, *Pseudolithos*, *Trichocaulon*) occur exposed to full desert sun.

They respond to heavy watering during warm weather while nights are cool. Cut back on watering during the high heat for the small creepers, but don't let dry out completely or they will go dormant for a while. The full sun lovers enjoy regular water throughout the heat of the summer. The whole group responds very favorably to heavy doses of fertilizer. I have experimented and found they do best in deep pots (to prevent rapid drying out of the roots) and a mineral soil mix.

When days and nights are cool, keep them bone dry, ensure excellent air circulation, and watch for mealybugs. I keep mine outside on a covered patio during the winter; they will all tolerate temperatures down to freezing if bone dry. On really cold nights I bring them inside. Water lightly the plants during the winter if there are a few warm days in a row. Resume regular watering when daytime temperatures are routinely over 70 degrees.

If a plant isn't growing during warm weather, or if it looks poorly during cold weather, it has mealybugs, even if you can't see them. Treat for mealybugs. I now incorporate imidacloprid, a semi synthetic nicotine pesticide, in my potting soil for ascleps. It is sold as Bayer Grub Granules.

They are very easy to grow from seed or cuttings.