

Conophytum

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Nicholas Edward Brown first described *Conophytum* (meaning “cone leaf” as a genus in 1922. Conos were known before that as members of the super-large genus *Mesembryanthemum* or mid-day flowers. *Conophytum* is a large genus in family *Aizoaceae* (which includes the mesembs) ranging over the winter-rainfall regions of the Cape Province of South Africa and southern Namibia. Mostly clumping, spherical plants, they differ from *Lithops* in having bracts on the pedicel (the flower stem, inside the plant body, which you can't see unless you rip them apart), and having the petals united into a tube near the base. They tend to occur in rock cracks or other partly to mostly shady spots. They also occur where dew and fog tends to condense, giving them more water than flatland dwellers. In the warm summer, they sleep inside paper sheaths composed of last year's leaves, bursting forth in the fall with the advent of moisture and cool nights. In our climate, many unsheathe with the monsoon, posing the eternal question: Should I water now?

They are generally easy to grow in fast-draining acid soils. With our basic, mineral-laden water, addition of 10% sphagnum moss to a 90% mineral soil mix or acidification of the water with vinegar or hydrochloric acid (swimming pool acid) helps. If you use hydrochloric acid, be sure you use pH paper to get the right pH. Many growers feed at each watering with fertilizer diluted to 10% normal strength.

Few Conos take any frost. Flowering is in the fall as growth resumes. Seed growers tell me they're easy. I bring mine into the house for the summer and put them up near a north window; they don't get watered from the time they sheath until just as nights cool down in September or October.

If you wish to learn more, join the Yahoo Mesembs group, and go to Tim Jackson's Mesemb Day in California in October.