

Echinopsis

Leo A. Martin

I don't know why Echinopsis species and hybrids aren't grown more often. Maybe it's because they grow easily, take frost to at least 20 degrees F, have spectacular flowers in large numbers, bloom very young, tolerate mistreatment well, and propagate readily. As far as I can tell, pretty flowers and easy-to-grow is the kiss of death for a plant wanting entry to the collection of a real konosewer. It's much better to be extremely ugly, look like a dead stick, and die if the owner dares to watch Fox News on TV. It doesn't even matter if it is a succulent--anything with a round base gets ribbons in the cactus and succulent shows, even if it grows in tropical rain forests such as Bombax or Hydnophytum.

Echinopsis, Lobivia and Trichocereus are closely related, so much so that many botanists think they should be grouped into one genus, because their flowers all have exactly the same structure. They would, under this plan, all be Echinopsis because that is the genus first described in 1837 by a botanist (Joseph Gerhard Zuccarini, 1797-1848, Professor of Botany at Munich). In the old days, people called columnar plants (some very tall) Trichocereus; globular plants producing long-tubed, night-blooming white flowers from the sides of the plants, Echinopsis; and plants producing short-tubed, day-blooming white to yellow to purple flowers from the tops of the plants, Lobivia. When you actually get out into central South America and look around, you find plants intermediate between all the above: white-flowered short-tubed Lobivias, colored day-flowering long-tubed Echinopsis, tree-like nocturnal white-flowered Trichocereus with tubes of many lengths. There really is no good place to draw a line and say, "This plant is definitely an Echinopsis and this is definitely a Lobivia." Then, there are the hybrids of complex ancestry. What to call them? I say just leave the name tags alone for now.

These plants are recognized by their flowers: hairy and maybe scaly, radially symmetrical, having a recessed ring of stamens in the throat. Many are nocturnal blooming, usually white, and often with fragrance. The diurnal blooming ones are usually colored, sometimes spectacularly. If you've never seen an actual Echinopsis species or hybrid in bloom, you've missed one of the best flowers in all Cactaceae. They are enormous, 4" to 6" in diameter, having tubes to 8" long. The satiny petals have a sheen. The flowers are usually short-lived, only a day in many, but make up for it in quantity. Many newer hybrids bloom several times during the summer.

They're also easy to grow. Most plants offset wildly, especially when happy. The offsets root while still on the daddy plant and just have to be separated and put into their own pot. Many separated in spring will be blooming size the next year if treated properly. They also grow easily from seed.

I propagate anytime the weather is warm enough for the plants to grow. In Phoenix that is year-round. I put the pups into heavy soil, not into cactus mix. These plants are seldom dry in habitat, summer or winter. I keep them moist. When the weather here is over 55 degrees F at night, I keep the plants wet, not moist. They will easily take being

kept very dry, but grow and bloom better with lots of water. You will not lose a pup if you keep it moist, but you will lose them if you let them dry out for more than two or three weeks. Once the pup starts growing, usually in 2-3 days if the nights are over 60 degrees, I treat it as an adult.

They will grow and bloom in full sun or indirect bright light. Take your pick. Plants in full sun are more compact and often spiner. Plants in bright shade are greener, lush and less-densely spined. They don't flower in deep shade but they grow. Hint: This means you can fit more plants into your cactus collection. That empty spot that's too shady for Mammillarias or Opuntias may be great for Echinopsis.

They like lots of fertilizer. Almost anything will do. They like regular liquid feeding. I use ammonium sulfate, one tablespoon per gallon of water, weekly in the summer. This is almost the same as full-strength Miracle Grow but lots cheaper. Don't give such feeding to all your plants! Many cacti can't take it. Osmocote evaporates in a few weeks in our heat; don't waste money on it.

In the winter, they can be kept quite cold. If a cold snap is coming and you're in a rush to bring your plants in, the Echinopsis, Lobivia, and Trichocereus can wait; bring your tender asclepiads in first. Just don't let them dry out completely, or the roots die, and the plants have a slow start the next spring. They might not bloom that year, either, which I have verified. Now I keep mine moist all winter.

Some people say prolific offsetting prevents blooming. I don't think it does.

Maury Clapp sells Echinopsis at our show and sale every year. Pick up a few.