Central Spine

January, 2012

Newsletter of the Central Arizona Cactus & Succulent Society

An Affiliate of the Cactus & Succulent Society of America

On the Web at www.centralarizonacactus.org

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Sunday, January 29, 2012, 2 PM
Webster Auditorium
Desert Botanical Garden

Presentation: Mutant Succulents
by Tom Glavich

Articles
• Growing in the Desert Series:
  Coping with Wet Winters--- by Mark Dimmitt, p. 4
• The Desert Botanical Garden That Almost Wasn’t --- by Tom Gatz, p. 5

Pelecyphora aselliformis  Photo by Scott McMahon, DBG’s Cactaceae Collections Manager, and CACSS member
February Newsletter Deadline:  
Feb. 11, 2012

2012 CACSS Officers  
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Welcome to New Members

Matthew Garcia
April Bojorquez
Patricia Cox
Bryan Scott Cox
Mary Tan Hobin
Nichole Olsker

Welcome back!  Cecilia A. Phelan
Membership Chair  Beth Kirkpatrick

Presentation

2 pm Sunday, January 29, 2012  
Webster Auditorium  (note location change)
Desert Botanical Garden

Tom Glavich, long time cactus and succulent collector, will talk to us about the strangest of the strange: Mutant Succulents!

Welcome to New Members

Matthew Garcia
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Nichole Olsker

Welcome back!  Cecilia A. Phelan
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President’s Letter  
Well, this is the 25th President’s letter that I have written (or am about to write) and I think I have mentioned the weather somewhere in most of them, so let’s start the new year off right, right?  Except for that nasty cold snap after Thanksgiving, it has been pretty mild.  I had some pretty bad icing occur down at my nursery even though it was only 34 degrees, and I lost a couple of things, but all in all, I can’t complain.  Warm weather will be here soon and I’m looking forward to a great growing season.

I am also looking forward to lots of group activities with the club this year, including an out-of-town bus trip.  Our Show and Sale is only a few months away so I hope all of you are ready to start thinking about plants to enter.  We had fantastic participation last year and I hope we can match it this year!

We have our first open garden coming up in February, and maybe some other members will decide to have one too.  I think that’s it for the moment.  Remember, if you have ideas or suggestions, bring them to my attention.

...  
See you at the meeting.  
Steve M.
Plant Name Correction—December Central Spine, p. 4

Photos by Doug Dawson, taken Nov. 5, 2011 within 5 miles from Superior, not far from the Boyce Arboretum. Yes, they look very similar to each other.

*Mammillaria grahamii*

*C. wrightii*

CACSS UPDATES

Volunteers needed for annual Show and Sale Committee: Committee chairs: Gard Roper and Steve Martinez Please contact Steve or sign up at the January meeting.

January Meeting Raffle: for the two remaining one-year memberships to the CSSA (sponsored by Doug Dawson and Gard Roper). To be eligible for the raffle: attend the meeting, be current with your dues, and must never have been a CSSA member.

Dues Reminder: Please pay for your 2012 membership if you have not yet done so.

Christmas Party Update

Happy New Year! Another holiday party has come and gone. We had a great turnout—about 90 members attended.

Aside from the appetizers, main meals and desserts, and of course the punch and coffee that Gard and Loren made, I know we all had a great time sitting with members and enjoying each other's company.

I would like to thank Dana and Debora for helping organize this event. And to all the volunteers who helped with set-up, tear-down and clean up in the kitchen. You know who you are.

Next December, you’ll need a new host or hostess to carry on the event. After at least eight years of having fun putting this event together, I’m retiring!

Jo Davis

Thanks, Jo, for all your hard work.
In early 2011 Southern Arizona gardens suffered from a hard freeze, the worst since 1978. Now we have to deal with another potential problem that we haven’t seen for a couple of decades – a very wet winter. Weather statistics fail to capture the issue. 2011 will go down as a barely above average rainfall year. Even if you look at the totals for November and December, neither of these months was anywhere near setting a record. The problem was in the frequency of storms. It rained at least once a week for seven weeks. Biologically that is very wet, because the soil has been continuously moist for all that time.

Roots, like all plant tissues, require oxygen for respiration. When soil is saturated, all the air is displaced by water, so respiration becomes impossible. There is usually no problem for plants in the ground. Rainwater percolates downward, and in non-clay soils the root zone does not remain saturated for more than a couple of days. Potted plants, though, are in danger; water cannot percolate beyond the bottom of the pot. After a heavy rain or irrigation, the bottom few inches of the potting medium remain saturated until the water evaporates or the roots absorb it and the plant transpires it. But many of the cacti and other succulents we grow are winter-dormant; they have minimal metabolic activity during the cooler months. In addition, there isn’t much evaporation when the weather is cool. After several days without air, roots suffocate, die, and then rot.

The best solution to drowned roots is prevention. Plants can be kept under a rain shelter while they’re dormant. If grown in the open, make sure that the potting medium is very well drained. In my opinion, most collectors whom I’ve visited use dangerously tight potting media. Most commercial growers also use very tight media. They have valid reasons: 1. Many of their plants are under cover where rain is not a problem. 2. They can’t afford the additional time and cost of irrigating hundreds of thousands of plants in coarse media.

That’s the only negative – the coarser the medium, the more frequently plants must be watered during the growing season. Collectors, however, should be more concerned with the long-term survival of their cherished specimens than how often they have to water. Remember: succulents are better adapted to drought than to soggy roots.

An important side note: Placing a layer of coarse material such as rocks or plastic peanuts in the bottom few inches of a pot does NOT improve drainage; it makes it worse! This is a law of physics that cannot be broken. Water cannot move from a finer textured medium into a coarser medium until the bottom of the upper layer is saturated. So a layer of coarse material beneath a regular potting mix simply moves the saturated layer higher in the pot, closer to the base of the plant and thus increasing the danger of rot.

If you have a succulent that is rotting at the base, un-pot it immediately, wash off the medium, and cut off dead tissue. Consider treating the cuts with a fungicide such as dusting sulfur. Store the plant upright in a dry place until its growing season begins. Then repot and hope for the best. And before you repot, consider changing your medium.

I couldn’t find a rotting succulent among my several thousand potted outdoor plants to illustrate this article. Three years ago I changed my potting medium to one that is at least half coarse coir. (Coir is coconut husk. For succulents it must be nearly all fiber with no dust. The fine grade that looks like peat moss is deadly; it stays soggy for days after watering.) Drainage of fibrous coir is superb. It holds lots of moisture, but is impossible to saturate; the medium is well aerated immediately after watering. Since I began using it, I’ve had almost no root rot. In fact, the only plants I’ve lost in this mix are two Caralluma socotrana, which are notoriously sensitive to root rot.

A final note: Winter-growing plants like most Crassulaceae and aloes are prone to rot if they’re too wet during their summer dormant season.
The Desert Botanical Garden That Almost Wasn’t

by Tom Gatz

(Reprinted from the Gatherings, the newsletter of the volunteers at the Desert Botanical Garden)

Many people have heard of Gertrude Divine Webster, the driving force behind the creation of the Desert Botanical Garden and the namesake of Webster Auditorium. Not so familiar is the name Gustaf Starck, the son of a Swedish sea captain who, concerned about the destruction of the native desert from citrus and cotton farming in the Phoenix area, convinced Gertrude to join the newly formed Cactus and Native Flora Society and in 1936 nominated her for president of that society. Together they promoted the Society’s seemingly far-fetched plan to create a desert botanical garden miles from town, accessible only by a dusty, dirt road.

Gustaf Starck, one of the co-founders of the Desert Botanical Garden, quit the Garden a few years after it was started partly out of disappointment with the deteriorating condition of the Garden’s plant collections, many of which he had donated.

Gertrude donated money, hundreds of plants from her estate and the services of her personal gardener, Arthur Johnson. Gustaf contributed his collection of seven hundred plant specimens. The preliminary plans for the Garden were drawn up by Charles Gibbs Adams who had designed the estates of William Randolph Hearst and Cecil B. DeMille. The plan was for “native cactus planted as though the hand of man had never touched them.” Apparently it was successful, since early visitors asked if anything had been planted yet.

The Garden opened in 1939. Unfortunately, things began to go downhill quickly. Jackrabbits ravaged the plants, finances were strained to the breaking point, and Gertrude, suffering from ill health, was no longer able to carry the financial burden of keeping the gates open. When World War II broke out, the remaining caretakers were unable to protect the Garden from the rabbits, unscrupulous people who walked off with the plants, field guns being dragged through the Garden’s beds and shelling of the area for target practice. Wartime gasoline rationing brought Garden activities to an abrupt halt. A few faithful Cactus Society volunteers continued to make the long trek out to the Garden to water the plants.

When the war ended, the Garden was gasping for breath, much of the collection was damaged or missing and membership had dropped to nineteen stalwart souls. The coffers were almost bare. Gustaf Starck, one of the Garden’s co-founders, frustrated with what was happening and suffering from ill health, withdrew from participation and died in 1945, before his beloved Garden re-opened.

Gertrude died in 1947 but still managed to come to the Garden’s rescue one last time. She left her entire Arizona property to the Society for the continuation of the Garden. However, her will stipulated that in order to receive the bequest, the Garden had to have at least two hundred members. A resourceful board member and two patrons each promptly purchased seventy-five memberships to give to friends.

Here we are over 70 years later, and it is still the generosity of donors, the often difficult management decisions by administrators and board members, and especially the hard work of staff and volunteers that enable the Garden to weather similar and new challenges year after year. And
yes, those darn rabbits still think of the Garden as their own personal all-you-can-eat salad bar.

These interesting facts and photos are found in the highly recommended book *Oasis in the City: The History of the Desert Botanical Garden* by Tara Blanc. It is available to read in the Garden Library and is for sale at the Gift Shop.

Staff and volunteers worked feverishly to complete this landscaping around Webster Auditorium just in time for the dedication in January, 1939

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Interesting *Arizona Republic* article, Dec. 31, 2011

“*Shear necessity? Desert plants unwisely pruned*”

Know your Desert Garden column, by Brian Kissinger, Director of Horticulture at Desert Botanical Garden

Here’s the link to the article (cut and paste):
Caralluma speciosa
Photo by Scott McMahon, Cactaceae Collections Manager, Desert Botanical Garden, and CACSS member

Contact the Central Spine Editor
Diana Decker
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for article and photo submissions, and to suggest topics you’d like to see included in the Central Spine.
PLANT QUESTIONS??  WHOM TO CONTACT!!

Many CACSS members have experience with different kinds of succulent plants. I hope they will add their names to the following list. Call or e-mail Diana Decker, Central Spine editor. (See contact information on p. 7)

For now the list is simply alphabetical with principal interests. When more members add their information, the list will be cross-referenced by topic.

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