

# Sunset Succulent Society

## June 2011 Cacti of the Month

### **Echinocactus, Ferocactus and Leuchtenbergia**

The Cacti of the Month for February are the two genera of Barrel Cactus from Mexico with outliers stretching into the Southern US and Guatemala.



*Echinocactus grusonii* entered in the 2001 Intercity Show by Jacques DeTisne

*Echinocactus* was once one of the ‘main’ genera of cacti, and had over a hundred species and more than a thousand names. As additional collection and research continued over the years, most of the species were separated into other genera, leaving only the nine that remain. *Echinocactus* superficially resemble *Ferocactus*; however *Echinocactus* have straight spines, while *Ferocactus* have hooked spines and nectar glands on the areoles.

*Echinocactus* are generally large plants, growing to three feet or more in diameter, and as high. The most common example is *Echinocactus grusonii*, popularly known as the ‘golden barrel cactus’ or ‘mother-in-law’s cushion, and a staple of any cactus garden. We are fortunate in having them grow well anywhere in Southern California. They are a prominent feature of the Huntington’s cactus

garden, and one of the key plants in the Getty Museum garden as well.

*Echinocactus* grow well in normal cactus soils. The Texas species are sensitive to over watering, but *Echinocactus grusonii* is nearly indestructible, and does best when planted in the ground.

Other species include:

*Echinocactus horizonthalonius* which grows wider than tall, has great spines, but requires more heat than we generally have for good growth.

*Echinocactus ingens* grows taller than the others, and has frosted white ribs and yellowish wool.

*Echinocactus texensis* is a smaller species. It has the only spectacular flowers of the genus.

*Ferocactus* is medium sized genus, with about 40 members.



*Ferocactus pottsii v. alamosanus* entered by C & J Spotts in the 2001 CSSA Show

With age, *Ferocactus* generally get to be very large plants, particularly when grown in the ground; fortunately, they are fairly slow growers. When grown in pots, they will stay at a comfortable size for many years. Although there are only about 40 species, many of them are fairly variable, with widely varying spine lengths, shapes, textures and colors, depending on the specific locality.

*Ferocactus* are easily grown, and most are perfectly happy outdoors without protection year round in Southern California. A normal well draining potting mix will do well. They need sun to bring out the colors and textures of the spines.

*Ferocactus* are easily raised from seed. Planting is most successful when done in April or May. The seedlings grow slowly at first, but soon take off. There are several advantages to growing *Ferocactus* from seed. The first is that the selection of type localities and spine variations is far greater than you will ever see at a plant show or sale. The second and most important is that you get to grow the plant through its awkward juvenile growth. During the second year *Ferocactus* spines grow completely out of proportion to the *Ferocactus* body. A *Ferocactus* that will eventually be a foot in diameter, and 4 feet tall with 3 or four inch spines, will have as a seedling a body less than an inch in diameter, with spines an inch or more long.

Favorite Species:

*Ferocactus chrysacanthus* from Baja California has dense golden spines, and becomes a spectacular species when about 8 inches in diameter. It will grow to 3 feet, eventually.

*Ferocactus emoryi*, from Arizona and Sonora, and shown above has long red spines that can vary from straight to hooked.

*Ferocactus latispinus*, from central Mexico, has flat reddish spines, with distinct grooves running crosswise, particularly on the bottom. A variety, *Ferocactus latispinus v spiralis* has the spines forming a spiral pattern up the stem. A spectacular plant when it gets to be about 18 inches tall.

*Ferocactus rectispinus*, closely related to *F. emoryi*, has bright red spines.

*Ferocactus stainesii*, from San Luis Potosi, has red to carmine spines, clusters quickly, and can grow to 9 feet, given enough time.

*Ferocactus wislizenii*, another Baja species has flat spines. It grows more in the winter than the summer.

*Leuchtenbergia* is a monotypic genus, (with one species) *L. principis*. It is very closely related to *Ferocactus*, but looks more like an *Agave*. It is grown just like a *Ferocactus*.

## References

Edward Anderson **The Cactus Family**  
J. Pilbeam, **Cacti for the Connoisseur**  
Cullmann, Gotz & Groner, **The Encyclopedia of Cacti**

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Photos by T. Nomer