

Sunset Succulent Society

Succulent of the Month April 2007 - *Cucurbitaceae*



Marah macrocarpa, a Southern California native *Cucurbit*

The *Cucurbitaceae* is a large family, with members throughout the temperate and tropics worldwide. The family also contains common vines such as cucumbers, watermelons, pumpkins, and cantaloupe. Many of the tropical forms are edible, although some are quite poisonous.

There are two caudiciform cucurbitaceae native to the Southern California. They can be found in the local hills, and in out of the way corners of many back yards. *Echinocystis (Marah) macrocarpa*, also known as the spiny cucumber, appears in the late winter as a climbing vine, growing over still dormant shrubs. It flowers in early spring, and then produces a light green, fist-sized fruit, covered with spines. Unfortunately, this plant rarely does well in pot culture. *Cucurbita foetidissima*, known as the Buffalo Gourd or Coyote melon can also found in the local foothills, although it is much harder to find.

One of the rarest of succulents is *Dendrosicyos socotrana*, a tree cucumber from the Island of Socotra. This island, off the coast

of Yemen is known for its endemic species and bizarre plant life. This monotypic species has a large trunk reaching to 20 feet tall and 3 feet in diameter, and prickly leaves.

Another rare and beautiful cucurbit is *Seyrigia humbertii*, from a genus found only in Madagascar. It has a small caudex, with blue green felt covered stems growing like very thick grass.

Momordica is a medium sized genus from the old world tropics with about 60 species, some of which form caudices. The most popular is *Momordica rostrata* which forms a pleated cone. Climbing vines start from the tip of caudex, grow through the summer, and die back in the fall. Also from the old world tropics is *Kedrostis*, a genus of about 35 species, the most common of which is *Kedrostis africana*, an easily raised caudiciform.

The new world equivalent to *Kedrostis* and is *Ibervillea*, with several species known, and with new species being found in the jungles of Southern Mexico and Central America. *Ibervillea sonorae* and *Ibervillea tenuisecta* are both readily available and easily grown. They form light gray elongated caudices. Like the African species, they won't tolerate cold, damp roots for long.

References

G. Rowley, **Caudiciform and Pachycaul Succulents**

M. Sajeve and M. Costanzo, **Succulents, The Illustrated Dictionary**

Tom Glavich March 2003