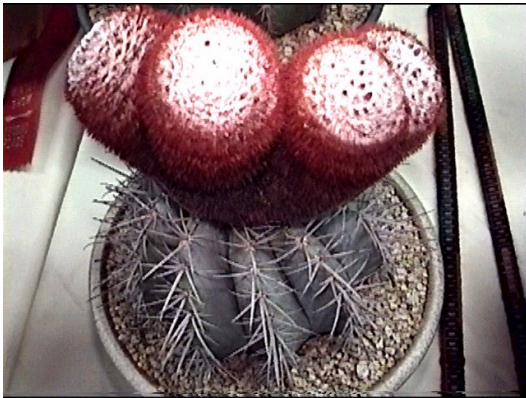


## Sunset Succulent Society

### Cacti of the Month June 2007 – *Discocactus* and *Melocactus*

*Melocactus* and *Discocactus* are two not-closely related genera of tropical cacti that share two distinguishing features. They are both globular and both form cephalia when they mature, with all flowers come from the cephalia.



*Melocactus azureus* entered by W. Minnich in the 1998 SGVCSS Show  
Photo T. Nomer

*Melocactus* are among the first cacti found, probably discovered and brought back to Europe by Columbus. Species native to Venezuela were in cultivation in England (and well grown even by our standards) as early as 1569! They are native to the Central America, the Caribbean and coastal South America, the range stretching up to Puerto Rico, and west into tropical Peru.

*Melocactus* are immediately recognizable by the large cephalium that develops on mature plants. *Melocactus* grow as normal appearing, but flowerless, globular cacti until they reach maturity. This can take from 6 to 15 years in cultivation, with a greater range in habitat. Once they reach maturity, the body stops growing vigorously (it still grows

slowly). Most of the plant energy goes into producing a cylindrical flowering and fruiting structure known as a cephalium. This is usually white, with short hairs of yellow, orange or red. As the years go by, the cephalium becomes more cylindrical, with the base becoming more colorful. The flowers are usually a red-purple, and the fruits are almost always a bright red, to attract birds. With age, the cephalium can grow to 18 inches or more in height, occasionally bifurcating or trifurcating.



*Discocactus bueneckeri* plants and photo by B. Hagblom

*Discocactus* are heavily ribbed Brazilian cacti. The genus is quite old, first described in 1835. *Discocacti* can be found inland in the states of Bahia and Minas Gerais, and further South in the states of Goiás, São Paulo, Paraná, Mato Grosso, and crossing into Paraguay, and even into the Southeastern most state of Bolivia, Santa Cruz.

The distinguishing characteristics of *Discocacti* are their globular to flattened globular shape, a cephalium, and fra-

grant night blooming flowers. Unlike *Melocacti*, the cephalia stay relatively small, are almost always white, and have long soft wool.

An important difference between the two genera is that the onset of a cephalium in *Melocactus* terminates vegetative growth. The body no longer gets larger. *Discocacti* have ring-meristems (a ring of growth cells) that surround the cephalium, and allow the body to continue to grow after the cephalium forms.

Both genera have similar cultivation requirements. They grow in rocky soil, often protected by nurse shrubs. The soil contains the decaying remains of shrubs, bromeliads, lichen, and other organic matter. The humidity is high, particularly during the growing season. Neither will tolerate cold, and particularly cold and wet. *Melocactus* in particular tend to get hard brown scars if they get too cold, even while dry.

### Particularly Interesting Species

*Discocactus bueneckeri* - the picture tells it all.

*Discocactus horstii* is without a doubt the best of the genus. It flowers when small, as little as 2 inches across. The cephalium is particularly hairy, and the fragrant flowers can be more than 2 inches in diameter, larger than the body of the plant when young. It is unfortunately one of the harder to grow. It rots easily, from the roots up. There are a number of *D. horstii* hybrids that also flower well, and are easier to keep alive.

*Discocactus magnimammus* is a larger plant, making a more flattened globe.

The ribs are subdivided into large rounded tubercles (thus its name). It has short light brown, curved spines, and a cotton-like cephalium.

*Melocactus curvispinus f. lobelii* is the first pictured *Melocactus*. The 1570 description is that of a plant the size of a medium pumpkin or the largest of melons, weighing 9 1/3 pounds with 14 bulging ribs bearing 'fearsome' horny incurved spines like a porcupine or hedgehog. You might as well have the first.

*Melocactus lanssensianus* is subglobose (fatter than tall) to about 8 inches in diameter.

*Melocactus matanzanus* has a white cephalium with orange to red spines getting denser towards the edge. Native to Cuba. Start like spines.

*Melocactus oaxacensis* is an olive green plant, smaller than most other *Melocactus*. The cephalium tends to be short, with dense brown spines. Flowers are a dark rose. This species is native to Oaxaca, and rarely seen.

References:

Britton and Rose, **The Cactaceae**  
Edward Anderson, **The Cactus Family**  
Rowley, **A History of Succulent Plants**  
Innes, C. and Glass, C., **Cacti**

Tom Glavich November 2004

Note by editor: Many *Discocacti* that were discovered only in the 1970s are now endangered or extinct in habitat due to agriculture and increased ranching.