

***Ferocactus acanthodes*: My Favorite Cactus**

Stands of these barrel cacti (Fig. 3) can be found in the rocky outcroppings of the western Sonoran Desert, and it's no large task to find "families" growing from the seedling stage to large, two-foot tall adults. The youngest seedlings are pronouncedly tubercled, with a lack of the ribs that are so distinct in adult plants. Although the sulphur-yellow blooms aren't something at which to scoff, my favorite feature of these cacti is the beautiful red spination. The hooked rosy spines form a glowing corona of scarlet light around the plant when appropriately lit at sunrise or, better, just before dusk. I have heard that the spines of these plants vary in color by locale, but where I camped, *F. acanthodes* bears such colorful spines that each plant stands out as a separate inspirational artwork against the quartz-laden, igneous stone hills. Extremely slow-growing, these are indeed plants which must be enjoyed in habitat, especially when a worthy specimen is framed by puffy-clouded skies. I simply cannot say enough good things about this plant, growing as it does out of seemingly solid rock.

Palo Verde Trees: Surprisingly Shady

No cactus seedlings can survive long in direct desert sun, which perhaps accounts for why young saguaros are often found under the shelter of yellow-flowering palo verde trees. Ultimately, however, the saguaro, in its thirst, will choke out

its host, resulting in the palo verde's eventual death.

Other Cacti

The persistent Sonoran Desert hiker will be treated to other, less imposing, cacti such as the colorful strawberry hedgehog (*Echinocereus engelmannii* v. *nicholii*), a shrub-like cactus growing in clumps rarely more than a foot across. These have straw-colored spines up to two inches long and create massive magenta blossoms as big as a wine glass. They tend to crop up as somewhat of a surprise—just when the tedium of bare rock becomes monotonous.

Various chollas each offer their own distinct flowers: the teddy bear blooms greenish-yellow; the chain-fruit (*Opuntia fulgida*) blooms a rust colored flower; and the buckhorn antler cholla produces reddish orange flowers.

The so-called beaver tail (*Opuntia basilaris*) produce rich magenta flowers, which contrast neatly against the cinnamon-speckled pale green pads.

But some cacti are to be admired less for their blooms, perhaps, than for their colorful stems. Case in point: *Opuntia santa-rita*. This shrub-like plant possesses flat, round pads of varying violet shades, and I was treated to numerous stands of it at higher elevations on the western approach to the mountains of Prescott.

Next spring, I plan to explore the western reach of the Sonoran Desert in Anza-Borrego.

DESERT CHARM

During the early 1930's, Harry Carr wrote a column, "The Lancer," for the Pasadena Star News. This enabled him to expound on myriad topics, and he focused on the desert and its plants after attending the great four-day CSSA Cactus Show held at Pasadena's Hotel Ambassador, starting on May 29, 1930.

Wrote he: "I don't know about this cactus show that has been attracting crowds at the Ambassador. What are these shows going to do to our desert cactus? Plenty, I am afraid.

"Of late years tourists have discovered that the desert is the most interesting and most alluring place on the American continent. It has poetry, mystery, and charm.

"Much of this charm comes from the plant life—the giant saguaro, the whiplash-like ocotillo; most of all the Joshua tree. Technically, perhaps, the Joshua is not a cactus. Its remote ancestor was the lily. It is a strange tree; twisted and gnarled, suggesting a soul in agony. It also suggests a repentant Magdalene, grown old, tortured by her memories.

"One of the few places in the world that these trees grow is the Mojave Desert. They have made of this desert one of the great wonderlands of the world. These trees are incredibly old.

"Most botanists hold that they lived as long as the giant redwoods. It is certain that many of them have lived in this desert for more than 1,000 years.

"Nobody paid much attention to them until lately. As soon as they began to realize their beauty and unique character, there began a wholesale foray into the desert to dig them up. A Joshua tree means absolutely nothing except in the desert. What gives it interest and charm is the setting. And also that touch of drama that comes from their struggles against thirst and desert winds. They seem to stand there—old and twisted—defying the cruel desert to do its worst. Stuck in somebody's yard, the Joshua becomes just a tree."

Larry W. Mitich