

The living rocks of Mexico

Ralph Peckover



Ariocarpus retusus has triangular tubercles like *A. trigonus* but has white to pinkish flowers

Some of the most sought-after and specialized cacti grow naturally in Mexico. The *Ariocarpus*-group occurs in Northern Mexico and the Southern parts of Texas. The harsh climatic conditions in these regions forced the plants to adapt their mode of growth in order to survive.

These unusual plants grow with most of their bodies under ground level so that less water is lost as a result of transpiration. Thorns for protection are absent and the plants use their thick skins, low profile and poisonous sap to avoid being eaten.

Temperatures at the plant surface often rise into the mid 50's (centigrade) and the plants adapted by developing an epidermis (skin) as thick as one's fingernail. This surface is almost as hard and it allows a slow loss of water through transpiration. A mass of hair in the middle of the plant gives additional protection from the broiling sun.

During the winter months (when almost no rain occurs) the plants shrink back into the soil and may become covered with a layer of soil. After the first rains the plants absorb water

rapidly and again appear at or slightly above the surrounding soil surface.

Growth occurs at a slow pace and a ten year old plant, grown under artificial conditions in a hothouse with sufficient water will be about 10 cm in diameter, having flowered perhaps for the past three years. In nature a plant with many heads could quite easily be a centenarian.

Within this group there are six species which all flower in autumn. They are: *A. trigonus*, which produces a ring of large yellow flowers; *A. scarpharostrus*, the rarest species with deep magenta flowers; *A. agavoides* (also called *Neogomesia agavoides*), a miniature plant with lively magenta-pink flowers; *A. fissuratus*, with large pink flowers; *A. kotschoubeyanus*, rosette-shaped with white or pink flowers and *A. retusus* with shiny white or pink flowers.

For the collector who cannot wait seven years before the plants flower, a grafted seedling will flower after two years if grafted onto a vigorous cactus stock. The plant can then be removed from the stock and left in a warm, dry place until

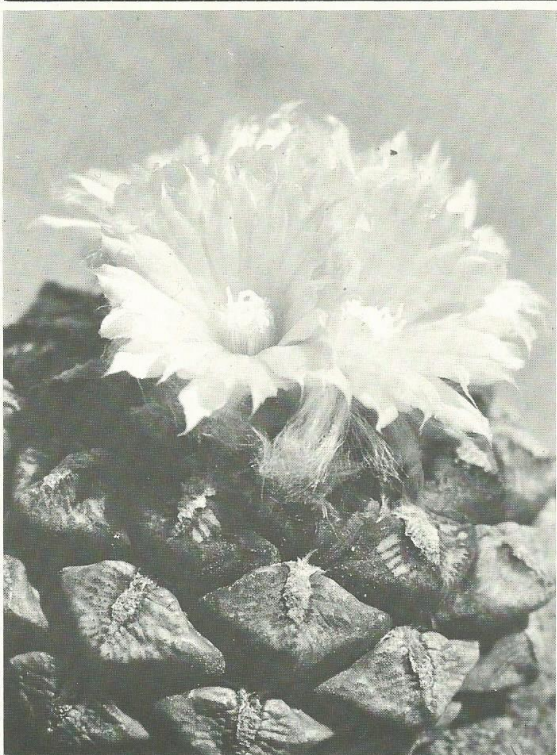


Ariocarpus kotschoubeyanus with an emerging fruit

roots develop into the air. This plant can then be established on its own roots in a container.

A well-drained soil, containing lime, will suit all the species mentioned. A hot, sunny position, even on a window-sill, will be necessary if a plant is expected to grow and flower. Watering in a hothouse may be done once a week but less often in cooler weather. Water should be withheld in winter. The plants may be bothered by scale or mealy bug but these pests are easily controlled by spraying of summer oils such as Oleum, Curoleum or Orchex.

The serious collector or an interested beginner should try to cultivate at least one of these plants as a *living stone*. It will reward the patience of the collector with iridescent blooms which can last for several days.



A large form of *A. fissuratus* with less prominent fissures is the variety *lloydii* with long lasting pink flowers

Aloe antandroi

Dave Hardy

Named after the Antandroy tribe of south-western Madagascar, this dainty aloe occurs in arid country, usually in sandy soils on eocene limestone. Most plants tend to scramble over or under bushes. A closely related species *A. millotii* occurs around Cap St. Marie in the extreme south of the country. Both species appear to take kindly to cultivation when protected from severe cold.

The colour plate of *Aloe antandroi* was produced for the journal "Flowering Plants of Africa", launched in 1921 by Dr I.B. Pole Evans, Chief of the Division of Botany and Plant Pathology. He intended the work "to bring to the notice of the public, botanical gems of nature". A further aim was that the publication would help to stimulate the study and cultivation of our wild flowers. Since 1921, 47 volumes comprising over 1800 plates with accompanying text have been published. To date sixty botanical artists have contributed to the journal. Two parts of 20 plates are published each year, each volume consisting of 4 parts.

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