

FOCKEA

by Sue Haffner

The small genus *Fockea* is endemic to Africa, where it is only found south of the equator. It was established in 1838 by Endlicher for the single species, *F. capensis*, and based on a specimen cultivated at the Imperial Garden at Schönbrunn in Vienna, Austria. This famous plant had been collected in the Cape Colony sometime after 1786 by explorers sent by Emperor Joseph II of Austria. It is apparently still living today—perhaps the world's oldest potted plant.

Fockeas are remarkable in being caudiciform chamaephytes, which means that they possess a large turnip-shaped root or subterranean stem tuber. This tuber is made up of spongy tissue capable to becoming engorged with water during the rainy season and then storing it for use during the dry season, or even through years of drought. Some fockeas have been found weighing close to 100 pounds, and it has been determined from field studies that they grow slowly to great ages—200 years or more.

Young plants usually grow in the shade of companion plants, trees, and bushes. As they mature the fockeas send up twining, straggling or erect aerial stems which can become so dense they sometimes strangle the support shrub to death. At other times, when rain has been scarce, fockeas are hardly detectable in the field, as they can drop their leaves and branches, leaving the remaining plant underground.

The leaves are all simple and opposite, but vary in size and dimension. Some have entire and flat margins, while others have undulating and strongly crisped margins. The leaves are variable in many extended populations, which have led in the past to some being described as new species. Flowers are typically bisexual, greenish white, regular, and nearly inconspicuous, with some exceptions.

Species of *Fockea* include: *angustifolia*, *capensis*, *comaru*, *edulis*, *multiflora* and *sinuata*.

Fockea angustifolia is widely distributed in southern Africa, in summer rainfall areas, mainly found in stony places, usually on slopes. Its leaves are grayish to brownish green, linear to narrowly elliptic, margins usually straight. The white flowers can have long, narrow corolla lobes, sometimes with elaborate fringed collars.

Fockea capensis is found only in the southern portion of South Africa where it grows on the Little Karoo and in the dry mountains forming its northern border. Usually found among other succulents on rocky slopes, its tubers can be tightly wedged among the rocks. It has gray-green, elliptic, finely pubescent leaves with strongly crisped margins. The greenish-white flowers are fairly inconspicuous.

Fockea comaru is found in Namibia and South Africa, on hillsides in stony places. It is the only species of *Fockea* that is common in the winter rainfall region of the western side of South Africa, where it always occurs with plenty of other succulents. Its stems are often short and erect, rather than climbing. It also has a rhizomatous habit and the stems can spread underground some distance from the tuber before emerging from the soil. Leaves are green to bluish green, the edges rolled. The flowers are grayish to brownish green.

Fockea edulis is the species most commonly found in hobbyists' collections. It is native to dry bush in the southern portion of South Africa, growing on slopes among rocks and bushes or trees. It's a vigorous climber in more bushy areas, less so in more arid areas. Its distinctly warty tuber usually projects slightly from the ground. The leaves and flowers of *edulis* are quite similar to those of *capensis*, with which it has often been confused.



Fockea edulis, photographed by Larry Grammar, California Cactus Center

Fockea multiflora is found in relatively low-lying areas among rocks around the base of hills in open often deciduous woodland. The leaves are gray-green, oblong to elliptic, slightly hairy. Flowers are grayish green, pubescent, inside yellowish green to brown. This is by far the largest species in the genus. The big fleshy stems sprawl on the ground or twist up the trunks of surrounding trees. While the young plants have a thickened base, this generally disappears with age so that in mature specimens there is no basal tuber and the rootstock consists of a network of fleshy roots radiating from the base of the stem.

Fockea sinuata is known from Namibia and South Africa, with a scattered but as yet incompletely known distribution. It's always found in open, flat, often pan-like areas in loamy, slightly calcareous ground. It consists of a very small erect stem, with narrow, brownish-green leaves with strongly undulate margins. Flowers are grayish-green, sparsely pubescent. The seeds differ from those of other fockeas in having a row of hairs all the way around the margin. The tubers are frequently excavated and used for food.

Culture: fortunately for the many caudiciform lovers, these boulder-like plants are relatively easy to grow. A coarse, gritty, well-draining soil medium that provides fast drainage, along with providing warmth and dryness in the cold winter months is an absolute necessity. Intermittent scalping of the stems or a mechanism for twining foliage growth (such as a trellis) helps to keep the plant in shape, subject to the grower's preferences. Propagation is easy from fresh seed. Growth of seedlings is rapid but is helped by frequent repotting and raising of the caudexes. I believe that stem cuttings can be rooted but I haven't tried this. My own plants survive winters on my covered patio with no problems whatever.

