

*Soehrensia formosa*



CRAZY CACTI

They are not necessarily the first choice for the back garden unless you live somewhere suitably sunny - dreary wet British winters are not their preferred climate, but cacti are truly remarkable plants; instantly recognisable, with often striking architectural forms. They are also surprisingly hardy with many species occurring in areas that endure cold weather. None more so than the magnificent *Leucostele (Echinopsis) atacamensis*, very much a Chilean saguaro. It has a similar form to that well known species, reaching up to 10 metres and although saguaros have been measured to 24 metres, it should be remembered that *Leucostele atacamensis* chooses to grow at a more rarefied 3000 to 4000 metres altitude in the bone dry high altiplano. I can vouch for this, my lips are cracked and bleeding after spending two days around San Pedro de Atacama exploring new areas not just for this charismatic species, but for the scarcer *Soehrensia formosa* (also formerly in *Echinopsis*). What was interesting was finding the two growing together in one area and talk about the perfect backdrop! The latter has glossy bright yellow flowers, whilst it's taller ex-cousin the more typical long-tubed



*Leucostele atacamensis*





*Leucostele skottsbergii*



*Copiapoa dealbata*



*Eriosyce oederi* (above)

*Copiapoa delabata*

white flowers. And cacti do have beautiful flowers. These can be various colours, but the general design is always the same a dense mass of stamens surrounding (often) prominent divided styles, squarely aimed at their main pollinators; bees. Many times, I've witnessed bees diving into the flowers and 'swimming' around in the stamens, covering themselves in pollen, before emerging again.

Most of my cacti experience has been Chile, a country which has a broad range of cactus forms, not just the towering *Leucostele atacamensis*, but everything from tiny buttons to big barrels. It also has a wonderful endemic genus; *Copiapoa*. The members of this genus also vary in size, but at their best they exist in extensive populations of multi-headed domes along the coastal fringes of the Atacama. Here they are nurtured by frequent fogs known as camanchaca on which they very much depend. The yellow flowers are rather modest are invariably nestled within the spines. At Llanos de Challe there are amazing gatherings of *Copiapoa dealbata*, some of the plants with two hundred heads and centuries old. A little farther (for Chile that is - this translates as about six

*Copiapoa gigantea*

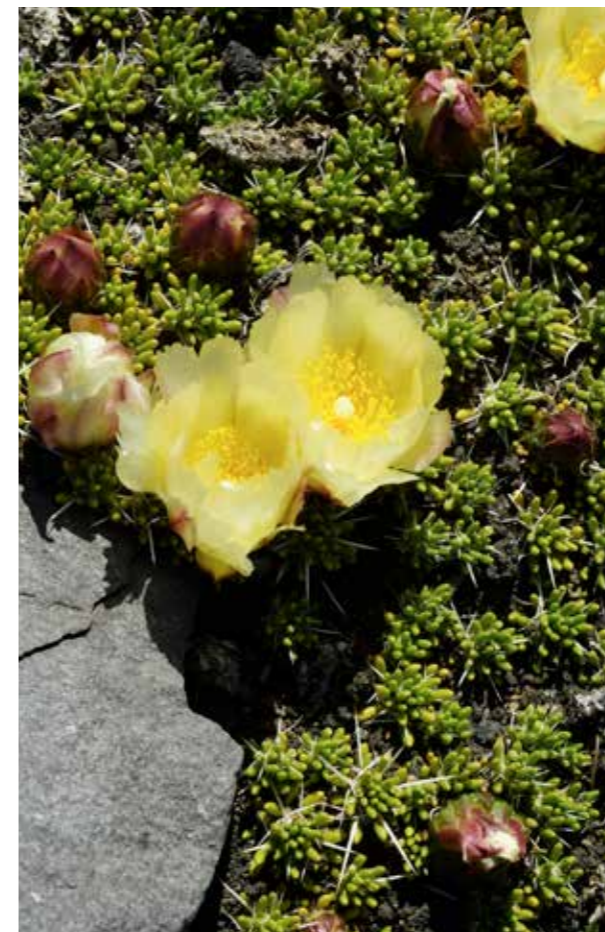




*Eriosyce aurata*



*Eriosyce aurata*



*Maihuenia poeppigii*



*Eriosyce chilensis*



*Eriosyce heldreichiana*

hours driving!) and there is a fabulous stretch of coast with abundant *C. gigantea* (until recently *C. cinerea* subsp. *haseltoniana*) and some old plants of these have developed into immense mounds. They often grow with the rather straggly *Eulychnia breviflora*, but give this ugly duckling a chance, the flowers and flower buds are a woolly delight.

Search the same areas carefully and with luck one can find the diminutive *Eriosyce oederi* growing in the gritty sands, virtually below ground. Its presence is only detected when it produces its showy greenish-yellow flowers. *E. heldreichiana* is even lovelier, but only marginally easier to find. *Eriosyce* come in many forms, from the striking golden barrels of *E. aurata*, beset with swirls of strawberries-and-marshmallows flowers, to the crisp pink of *E. chilensis* that adorn coastal cliffs along the Mediterranean climate coast. One species; *E. curvispina* even makes it south into the southern beech forests (sometimes growing with bamboo for the strangest combination of plants imaginable) extending its range into the high Andes, where I've seen it at over 3000 metres. Another more southerly species is *Maihuenia poeppigii*, a mat-forming species that colonises

*Eulychnia breviflora*





*Browningia pilleifera*



*Espostoa lanata*



*Melocactus bellavistensis*



*Trichocereus macrogonus* var. *pachanoi*

*Browningia candelaris*



*Trichocereus macrogonus* var. *pachanoi*



*Ferocactus cylindraceus* (above and below left)



*Ferocactus viridescens* (above)

matorral and the black ash slopes of volcanoes. The spiny spreads are peppered with brimstone flowers that attract a tiny black bee.

Transporting instantly to the very far north, there occurs another higher altitude giant; *Browningia candelaris*. These are a remarkable sight in the way up to Putre, growing from 2500 to 3000 metres and scattered across the most austere rocky desert. The genus occurs farther north into Peru, where there are other species such as *B. pilleifera* in statuesque candlestick stands in the drier interior valleys. Peru also has a rich cactus flora including the rather fun *Melocactus bellavistensis* (a relative of the first species to be introduced to Europe) with their peculiar topknots of densely packed bristles from among which squeeze little bright pink flowers, the peculiar columns of *Espostoa lanata* with flowers lining the stems and even woolly mounds of *Austrocylindropuntia floccosa* that hunker down on high Andean slopes above 4000 metres. And then there is another whopper; *Trichocereus macrogonus* var. *pachanoi*, and this magnificent organ pipe cactus is often planted around Andean foothill villages and you can understand why when you see the flamboyant huge flowers. Peru, Bolivia and Argentina have a great many species and Mexico is another the diversity hotspot. I've yet to explore this country for cacti - it's on the list.

Immediately to the north, the US has some excellent species too and even on a short visit to Anza-Borrego in southern California it's possible to see superb populations of *Ferocactus cylindraceus*, which in March-April are adorned with rings of yellow-green flowers fringed by rings of (sometimes pink suffused) large spines. And spines are very much a cactus thing. Near San Diego a second species *F. viridescens* can be found with heavier defences. Others such as cholla; *Cylindropuntia echinocarpa* bristle with white spines and its flat-stemmed cousin *Opuntia basilaris*, a rather handsome cactus with showy pink flowers has tiny irritating spines packed into nodules on the stems, and these wedge uncomfortably into the skin with the slightest contact. There are some other beauties in California and the US I'm keen to see; showy *Echinocereus*, the interesting cold tolerant mountain steppe species in Colorado and saguaros of course, though whether these giants can match the impressive soaring Andes backdrops enjoyed by the Chilean version remains to be seen.

And that is half of it with cacti, they invariably grow in the places of raw scenic beauty that it's well worth a spine or two in the wrong place.



*Cylindropuntia echinocarpa*



*Opuntia basilaris*