

San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society

Succulent of the Month April 2002 - *Cucurbitaceae*

Cucurbitaceae is a large family, with members throughout the temperate and tropical regions world wide. The family contains common vines such as cucumbers, watermelons, pumpkins, and cantaloupe. Many of the tropical forms are edible, although some are quite poisonous. A few of the caudices are also edible, but generally only with special preparation. A number are used for their medicinal properties.

There are two caudiciform cucurbitaceae native to the San Gabriel Valley. They can be found in the local hills, and in out of the way corners of many back yards.



Marah macrocarpa

Echinocystis (Marah) macrocarpa, also known as the spiny cucumber, appears in the late winter as a climbing vine, growing over still dormant shrubs. The vine starts in an underground caudex that can be several feet in diameter. It flowers in early spring, and then produces a light green, fist sized fruit, covered with spines. As the fruit dries, the end splits, exposing four tubes of large seeds. Unfortunately, this plant does not survive in

pot culture. *Cucurbita foetidissima*, known as the Buffalo Gourd or Coyote melon can also found in the local foothills, although it is much harder to find.

Many of the more collectable cucurbits are tropical caudiciforms, requiring warm weather for growth, and sensitive to cold and wet. Typical growth habits start with a fast growing vine starting in late spring to early summer, ending growth in late September or October. When the vines die back, they can be cut off, and the caudex removed to a garage or basement for winter storage. Most are very vigorous growers and will grow much faster and better if given free root run.

One of the rarest of succulents is *Dendrosicyos socotrana*, a tree cucumber from the Island of Socotra. This island, off the coast of Yemen is known for it's endemic species and bizarre plant life. It is an Indian Ocean equivalent to the Galapagos Islands. This monotypic species has a large trunk reaching to 20 feet tall and 3 feet in diameter, and prickly leaves.

Another rare and beautiful cucurbit is *Seyrigia humbertii*, from a genus found only in Madagascar. It has a small caudex, with blue green felt covered stems growing like very thick grass.

Also from Madagascar is *Xerosicyos* with four species. The most common is *Xerosicyos danguyi*. This species has quarter sized glaucous green leaves widely spaced on sprawling stems. It is relatively easy to grow, as long as it is kept dry in winter and not allowed to get much below 40 degrees.

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Odosycios bosseri entered by Petra Crist in the 2001 Intercity Show (Photo T. Nomer)

One of the newest Cucurbits to enter cultivation is *Odosycios bosseri*, a caudiciform species from Madagascar, shown above.

Momordica is a medium sized genus from the old world tropics with about 60 species, some of which form caudices. The most popular is *Momordica rostrata* which forms a pleated cone. Climbing vines start from the tip of caudex, grow through the summer, and die back in the fall. Also from the old world tropics is *Kedrostis*, a genus of about 35 species, the most common of which is *Kedrostis africana*, an easily raised caudiciform. Similar to *Kedrostis* is *Gerrardanthus*, differing only in the fruits and details of the climbing tendrils. Both genus

have several members that form very large caudices. They are rampant growers, and do well in the ground during the growing season.

The new world equivalent to *Kedrostis* and *Gerrardanthus* is *Ibervillea*, with several species known, and with new species being found in the jungles of Southern Mexico and Central America. *Ibervillea sonora* and *Ibervillea tenuisecta* are both readily available and easily grown. They form light gray elongated caudices. Like the African species, they won't tolerate cold, damp roots for long.

Other less common members of the family include *Anisosperma* from Brazil, *Cephalopentandra* from Tropical Africa, *Ceratosanthes* from the Caribbean and South America, *Coccinia* from Africa and Asia, *Corallocarpus* also from Africa and Asia, *Cyclantheropsis* from Africa and Madagascar, *Eureiandra* from Africa and Socotra, *Nealsomitra* from India to Australia, *Telfairia* and *Trochomeria* from Africa, *Zehneria* from the Old World Tropics, and *Zygosicyos* from Madagascar. Continuing exploration of the tropical forests of Africa, Asia and the Americas will bring new genus and species to the collector.

References

- G. Rowley, **Name that Succulent**
- G. Rowley, **Caudiciform and Pachycaul Succulents**
- A. Sajeve and M. Costanzo, **Succulents, The Illustrated Dictionary**

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