

Talking about Sulcorebutias - 2

In his second article on the genus *Sulcorebutia* John Pilbeam takes a closer look this time at two of the most popular and widely grown species. Photography by Bill Weightman.

* * * * *

In spite of the taxonomic tug-of-war going on involving among others the genus *Sulcorebutia*, both as to the standing of the genus and the species themselves, they remain among the most popular among collectors. As their availability has increased steadily over the last ten years or so, there are few that are not obtainable with a little persistent searching. But do heed the warnings I uttered in the first article under this title, about correctly applied names: as the length of the seed lists available is increasing every year so the reliability of the plants obtained seems to be in inverse ratio on the decrease, and far too many hybrids masquerading as good species (with numbers attached too!) are to be found offered these days.

I have several pots of seedlings acquired over several hopeful years from quite well-respected seed merchants, which proclaim either an unbelievable, extraordinary variation in the species they are supposed to be, or more likely I am afraid betray a lack of respect for the need to ensure that no casual pollination by insects occurs in their parent plants. Perish the thought that the seedsmen might be so unscrupulous as to ply the brush willy-nilly themselves!

***Sulcorebutia*
arenacea - one of
the many forms in
cultivation**



May I suggest that if you have experienced similar results you record the doubt in your mind on the label, if only by adding a questionmark and perhaps the origin of the seed as a reminder to yourself for seed sources for future purchases, for example "*S. albissima* ? ex Joe Brush-happy 1992". But back to happier, less controversial matters.

Two *Sulcorebutia* species have been for me always outstandingly beautiful plants to cultivate, and both are among the first I acquired more than 20 years ago when the *Sulcorebutia* bug first really bit me. They are *S. arenacea* and *S. mentosa*. Both my plants are now in 17cm pans and asking for larger this year, as in time they have offset, and now the offsets have reached a fair size too. When the offsets in turn start to offset I shall be in real trouble, but maybe that will take so long that it will not worry me at all.

I think that the very short spined *S. arenacea* pictured was at least 10 years old before the large orange-sized head thought about offsetting, and even now that it is the size of a grapefruit it has produced only about a dozen subsidiary heads, although another higher row has just started to emerge from the main stem. This plant is a very close match to that originally pictured (albeit as a *Rebutia*) by Cardenas in 1951, both in its colouring, its short spines, and consequently the separation of the spine clusters. Other plants I have acquired since of this species tend to be longer spined and less white, with more a sandy-brown appearance, the spines overlapping to form more shaggy plants. But they are no faster growing, and have taken as many years to offset as the first mentioned. I have seen in recent years some hybrids of this species masquerading as *S. arenacea*, with clear affinities to this species, but with finer and denser spination usually, not such a depressed growing point, and noticeably developing spines there early in the style of *S. mizquensis* or *S. verticillacantha*, which good *S. arenacea* seem not to do. By the way, or should I say incidentally, other yellow flowered *Sulcorebutia* species from broadly the same geographical area were named subsequent to this species, so *S. arenacea* would have preference if the lumpers ever have their way - a depressing thought.

The early *S. mentosa* plants that came into cultivation in the 1960s and 1970s tended also to have a large solitary head, reluctant to offset until some years had gone by. One I had in particular I remember got to about 23cm tall and was collapsing under its own weight before the necessary shortening induced it to behave itself and produce offsets. But my pride and joy of this species as I mentioned above is now bursting out of a 17cm pan, and has 4 or 5 rows of offsets around the base of the large, original stem, which is now some 20cm tall. In flower it is an absolute knockout, the pale pink flowers contrasting wonderfully with the almost black spines and darkest of dark green stem colour. Plants of this species that have come on the scene in more recent years under HS numbers

**Sulcorebutia
arenacea -
widespread and
popular in
collections, this is a
slow-growing and
variable species**



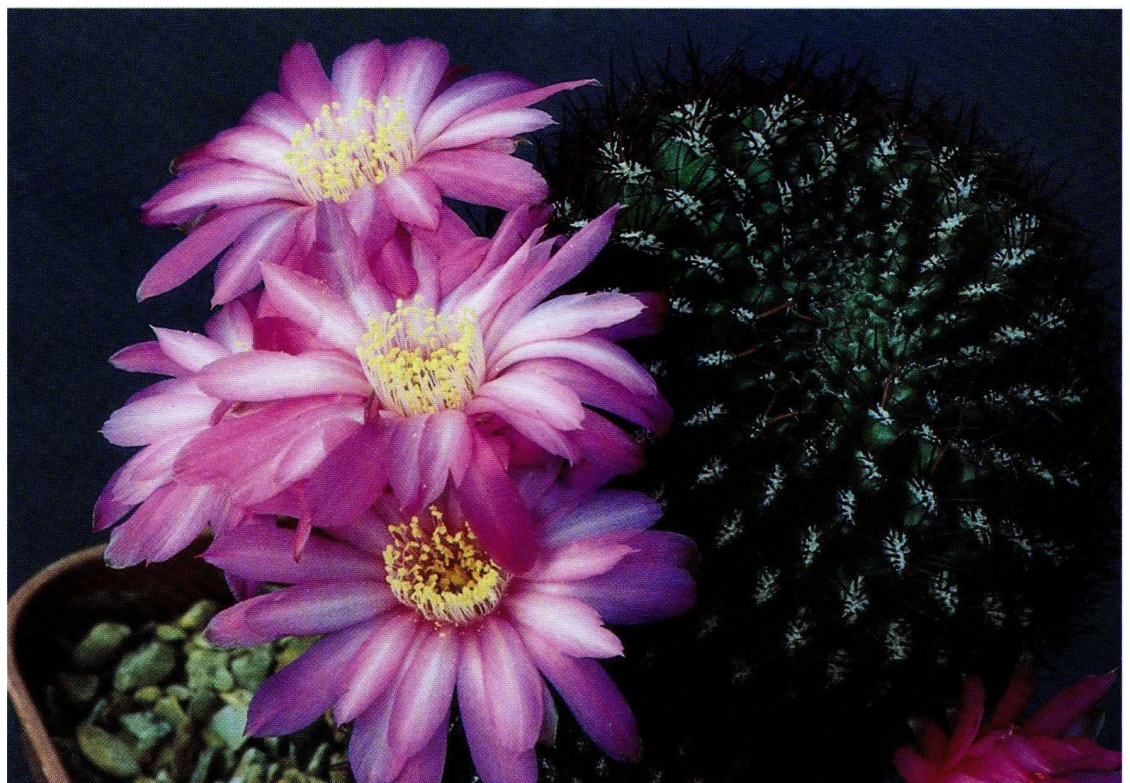
have shown a marked tendency to stay smaller headed and to cluster much earlier.

S. mentosa is from the same area (Aiquile) as *S. flavissima*, superficially a quite different looking species, named for its bright yellow spines. Also from there comes the finer spined *S. swobodae*, which comes in a variety of brown and yellow spines, mostly yellow. They all three tend to flower at the same time and have very similar flowers, which lends weight to the opinion held by some Sulco. buffs that they are

synonymous, in spite of the very differently coloured spines. With intermediate, brown-spined variations occurring it is difficult to refute this argument. I was once solemnly shown a "yellow-spined *S. mentosa*" and a "black-spined *S. flavissima*". Oh yeah, I thought.

From a collector's point of view the differences make them all worth a place, but do not let your labels fade or be misplaced, else you might not remember which is the black/yellow/*S. mentosa* / *S. flavissima* - perm any two from four!

**Sulcorebutia
mentosa - many of
the plants that have
come into
cultivation recently
have smaller heads
that those
previously known**



Originally published in **The Cactus File** 1992 Volume 1 N°5 (p. 12-13)

© **The Cactus File**

Reproduced with permission from the author.