



If It's Flowers You Want . . . Try Sulcorebutias

by John Pilbeam

Photos by Bill Weightman

Among the Sulcorebutias excitement is stirring. What next, they are wondering. Here we sat for thousands of years in the mountains of Bolivia, with no interference and no one caring about our taxonomy or even our very existence, and suddenly we are swooped upon by these damned palefaces, dug up, chopped up and distributed all over the place, and argued about extensively. Never in the fields of cactus conflict has so much been said by so many about so few.

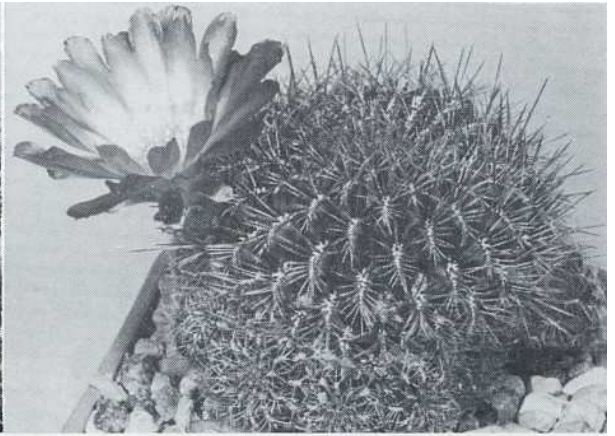
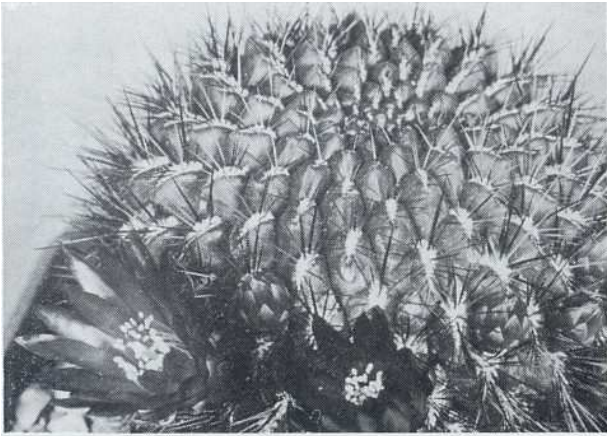
Leaving all this 'nameclutter' aside, we now have available to us a wealth of plants of this genus, mostly with unprecedented good pedigree by way of field data to satisfy most Sulco enthusiasts' desires, and providing the opportunity to those only just getting to know the genus to acquire a goodly number fairly easily.

And they are so undemanding, requiring little if any heat, as my good, debunking friend, Doug Sizmur, proved promptly by putting all his Sulcos into a cold frame as soon as I suggested that they must be winter hardy if kept dry, coming as they do from considerable heights in the Andes - about 8-10,000 feet. Mind you, he did it with the proviso that I would have to replace

them if they did succumb. That was three or four winters ago, and they are still going strong and flowering if anything even more freely. Nor are they too fussy about composts, growing equally well in soilless or good soil-based composts. After several experiments with different soils I have formed the opinion that either will do as well, as long as it has good drainage by the addition of 30 or 40% grit, when watering and feeding can be given freely in the growing period, with the usual precautions about allowing them to nearly dry out between waterings.

Like Rebutias they are susceptible to red spider mite damage, and they have proved to be a nice change of diet for mealy bugs in their various manifestations. I have found PBI "Flydown" effective against both these pests, but it is strictly a contact insecticide, which means that offsetting plants, which many Sulcos are, must be thoroughly drenched, (preferably with a wetting agent included) to get at the perishers lurking around the bases of the offsets, and in the case of

Above: SULCOREBUTIA KRUGERI



Upper left: *SULCOREBUTIA TOTORENSIS* var. *TOTORENSIS*
Lower left: *SULCOREBUTIA MARKUSII*

Upper right: *SULCOREBUTIA HOFFMANNIANA*
Lower right: *SULCOREBUTIA LANGERI* nom. prov.

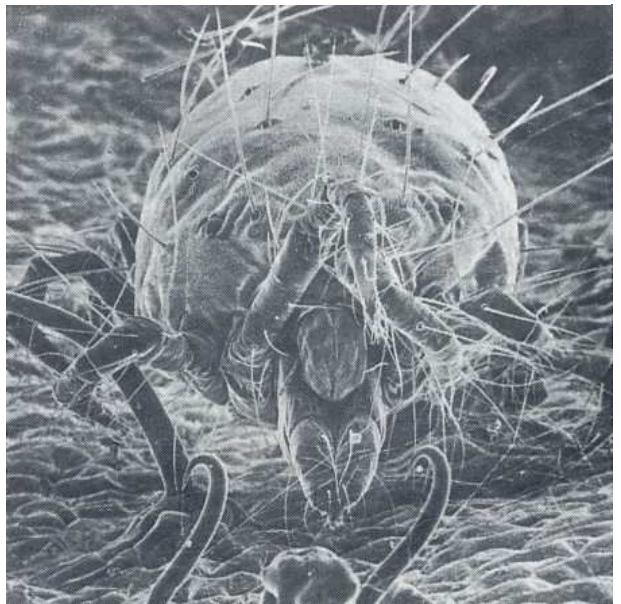
severe or persistent infestation, some if not all offsets may have to be removed to effect a complete cure. Systemic insecticides help of course, but prevention is better than cure, so that regular dosing with contact and systemic insecticides should be a routine. The SEM photograph of a red spider mite included (by courtesy of BP and through the good offices of Frank Trigg) gives you some idea of what you are up against with this pernicious animal - perhaps it is as well they are the size they are, seen only clearly with a x10 magnifying glass, although the browning effect on your plants is well known and very visible.

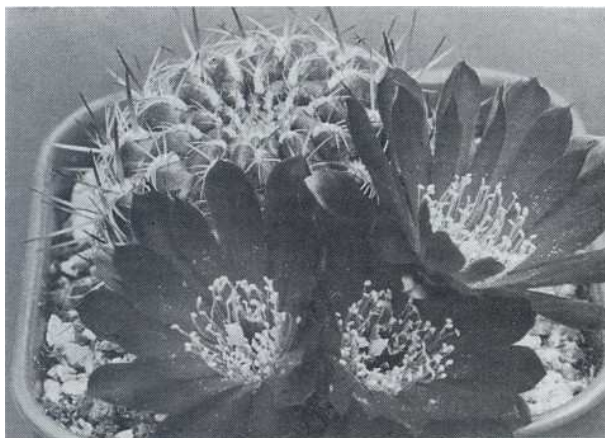
In recommending a choice of species it is difficult to be selective, since there are few that have not both attractive spination and ample flowering capabilities. But after some years of growing these beauties there are some which have the edge for me.

Probably the easiest way to sort them for this purpose is by flower colour, although this is a plastic character in this genus, with some species having three or four alternative flower colours.

Among the "normally" yellow flowering species *S. krugeri* (not *krugerii* - a misunderstanding of yet another change to the ICBN rules) takes a lot of beating, and it will form a flattish clump to 20cm (8 in) or so in a few years with club shaped heads and pinkish-

Below: SEM photograph of a red spider mite reproduced by courtesy of Mr S. Dodson of B. P. Research Centre.





Upper left: SULCOREBUTIA OENANTHA
Lower left: SULCOREBUTIA CANIGUERALII

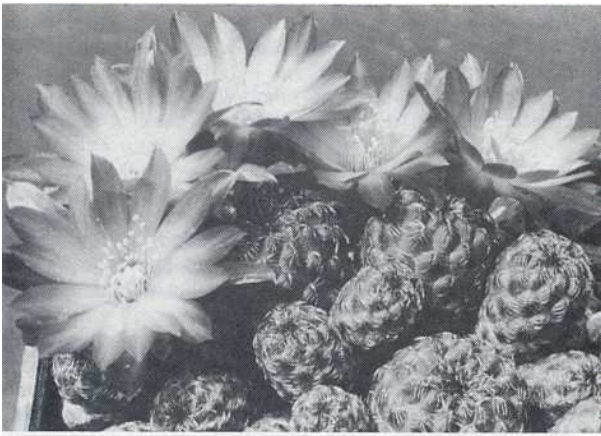
Upper right: SULCOREBUTIA ARENACEA
Lower right: SULCOREBUTIA STEINBACHII

brown spines neatly laid on the long areoles characteristic of the genus. I saw this species exhibited many years ago at a GB Society show in Vincent Square, Westminster, as a *Rebutia* since it really was a long time ago, and remember thinking how unfair it was to the general run of fairly ordinary Rebutias available at that time, that they should have to compete with such a "cracking" species. But it takes equal second place for me along with *S. langeri*, a small-headed, neatly brown or white spined species which has been available only in the last few years. The prime place among the yellow flowerers is won by a length by *S. arenacea*, surely one of the best looking species in the Cactaceae, let alone just this genus. It comes in a variety of spine length and colour, white or brown, with my preference for the shorter, white spined form but always with deep rich, old butter-yellow flowers, and attractive dark orange fruits thereafter. It tends to stay solitary for some years before offsetting around the base and giving you space problems.

Turning to the pure red flowered species, *S. oenantha*, with flowers reminiscent of the deep wine-red theatre curtains of my youth, is one of my favourites. This is another which tends to remain solitary for some time, before popping out the odd offset in cultivation as though conscious that it is

really unnatural and maybe a little indecent to do so, like Bill Weightman's *Euphorbia obesa* recently featured. Likewise *S. totorensis* has this tendency as well as similar dark, Macbeth-red flower colouring coupled with wonderfully dense, mahogany or deep fox-red spines. And less sumptuous in its spines but slow-growing and almost reptilian in its appearance, with short spines and diamond shaped tubercles is *S. markusii*, with incredibly prolific flowering capabilities - I have counted over a hundred of the dusky red flowers on one 5cm (2 in) diameter stem. There are few other genera which match these for depth of red flower colouring.

The combination of red and yellow is one which makes for a most attractive display of flowers. It is found in several species, sometimes as an alternative flower colour, such as in *S. steinbachii*, but it is the standard in such species as *S. hoffmanniana*, among the most variable in its spination, forming large clumps of heads in time, and varying from practically no central spines at all (known also as *S. seinoiana*) to dense thickets of various shades of brown. Other species with this flower colouring are *S. canigueralii* sometimes underrated from an untidy growing form distributed extensively in the early 1970s. making elongated stems, unlike the much better looking purple



Upper left: SULCOREBUTIA VERTICILLACANTHA var. AUREIFLORA
Lower left: SULCOREBUTIA MIZQUENSIS

Upper right: SULCOREBUTIA MENTOSA
Lower right: SULCOREBUTIA RAUSCHII

coloured more globular form which will make a clump to 20cm (8 in) wide or more fairly quickly, blazing with colour when it produces its flaming flowers. The other I would recommend with either yellow, or yellow with red tips in varying degrees, is the tiny-headed, heavily clumping *S. verticillacantha* var. *aureispina* (often quite erroneously labelled *S. verticillacantha* var. *cuprea*, a quite different variety). It is also seen labelled *S. callecalleensis*, a name used by Fred Brandt of West Germany, taking precedence if it is decided that it is a good species in its own right.

There are many with magenta flowers, or perhaps you might call them various shades of pink, always a difficult colour to define. One of the best is *S. mizquensis*, and it combines with a plant covered with close-fitting off-white spines, and one of the smaller growing, suitable for pot-restricted classes, since a cluster of this species with some 20 or 30 heads can be easily encompassed in a 3 or 4 inch (10cm) pot.

I always think these clusters look better in round rather than square pots. One which will sit quite happily for some years as a solitary plant in a square pot however, is *S. mentosa*, although some recently introduced forms do cluster at an earlier age than those which first came into cultivation. It makes large stems, to about 10cm (4 in) tall and wide, with dark

green body colouring and almost black spines, which colouring contrasts wonderfully with the rather pale magenta flowers it produces. The larger growing form will eventually offset and it makes a magnificent clump in time. This species is close to *S. flavissima*, except that the latter has rich golden yellow spines. In both the spines and flowers complement each other beautifully.

I could go on, but I think the magenta flowered *Sulcorebutia* species deserve an article of their own and maybe I will do that some time. But I could not finish without mention of what is probably my and many others favourite in the genus. *S. rauschii* is fittingly named for Walter Rausch, whose explorations in Bolivia introduced this and many other wonderful plants to our collections. It comes in a variety of body colouring, from green to purple and almost black, and with black, brown or yellow spines, but always with a habit of growth reflecting the harsh terrain these species endure, tightly clustering and low to the ground. The flower colour is in various depths of bright magenta, and it is recommended in any or all of its forms.

Sulcorebutias are certainly worth a try if you have not yet grown them, and they are worth quite a sizeable piece of bench space - if it's flowers you want.

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