

# Well, I still call them sulcos

JOHN PILBEAM MUSES OVER THE ATTRACTIONS OF *SULCOREBUTIA*, AND PONDERS OVER SOME UNANSWERED ASPECTS OF THEIR CONDITIONS IN HABITAT. PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL WEIGHTMAN.

51 CHELSFIELD LANE, ORPINGTON, KENT BR5 4HG UK

There is no more rewarding genus of cacti for flowers than the genus *Sulcorebutia*, either for freedom of flowering, with 100 or more flowers on a plant of a few years old not uncommon, or for brilliance of colouring, from dark purple and the paler shades of magenta and mauve, through the whole range of red, from the darkest of deep wine-red through cerise, scarlet, to orange, pink, yellow and white, including combinations of colours, for example magenta and white, red and yellow, and even red and orange.

And they are obliging, coming from the high altitudes that they do, in needing little if any heat in the winter, if they are dried off before there is any real danger of the temperature dropping below freezing in the glasshouse. Certainly it is safer to keep the frost out, but that is all that they need, and I know of growers who have grown them for some years in cold frames with no heat at all.

Light they need aplenty, for the same reasons as their cold tolerance, for they get high doses of ultra-violet high up in the Andes, although I have always wondered how many hours of actual sunlight they get a day, with the inevitable cloud covering at this height which commonly occurs. I have never shaded my glasshouse where they are, and have only managed to burn that rather sparsely spined species, *S. purpurea*, when it was caught after a cloudy spell by one of those days that has foolhardy English sunbathers imitating cooked lobsters for colouring.

The one warning I must give to those who might be swayed by this article to grow a few sulcorebutias for the first time, is that they are addictive, and that, despite what the lumpers say, they can occupy a good deal of space if you get really enthusiastic. My collection of them takes up all one side of a 5 metre glasshouse, and spills onto shelves and a quarter of the other side - and they all need potting on this year! I have however seen larger collections.

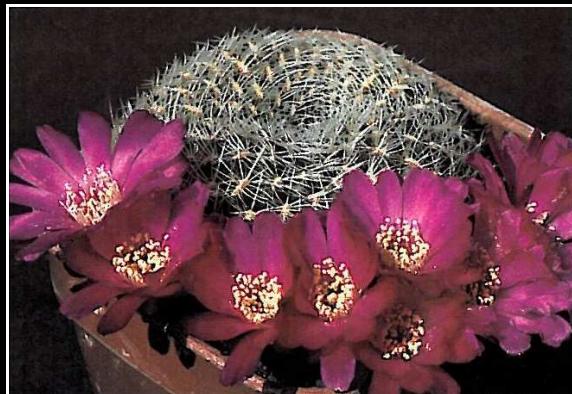
The taxonomy is a mess, not helped by attempts to make it even more confusing by the sinking of the whole genus beneath the equally confused *Rebutia*; I know of no real enthusiast for the genus who has yet changed his or her labels to *Rebutia* - nor do I wish to hear from any who have! I enthuse about both genera, but see more differences than similarities.

There is undoubtedly considerable variation in species, which has led to too many species for the comfort of lumpers, and conversely to the allocation of varieties to species with which they seem to have little in common. Similarly there has been some desperate, somewhat random combining of species without too much regard for the precept that any that are distinctive enough to be easily differentiated and so desirable from an enthusiast's point of view, perhaps justify recognition at lesser rank.

David Hunt has set a good example in his recent pronouncements on the genus *Mammillaria* in his excellent publications *Mammillaria Postscripts* in which he says 'we need one hold-rank below species for anything sufficiently distinctive to warrant a mention ... the category subspecies is preferable to variety'. What followed from this was a recognition at this rank of worthwhile previous *Mammillaria* varieties and forms, plus a few previously recognized as species. But what constitutes a species, in either of these confusing genera, is another question altogether.

Another puzzle that bothers me about sulcorebutias is that I have not heard of anyone who has seen these plants' pollinators at work in the wild. The earthy, distinct odour of the flowers, and their low placing on the plants implies maybe crawling pollinators rather than flying ones, although the size of the flowers and their brilliant colouring seems out to attract insects such as bees, although what counts in this respect is of course what colours the bees see in the ultra-violet range. What sort of insect life there is at the sort of altitudes they occur is

# Sulcorebutia mentosa



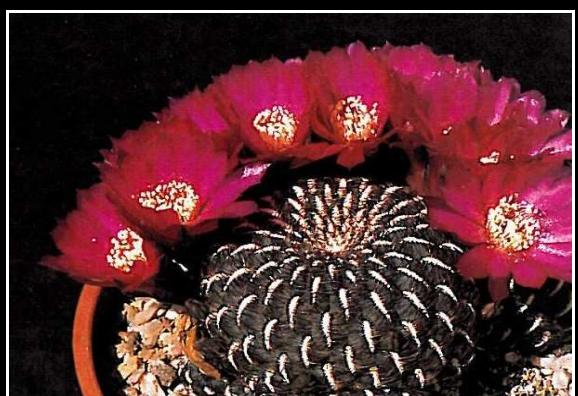
*SULCOREBUTIA ALBISSIMA* HS 13



*SULCOREBUTIA ALBISSIMA* 'VAR. *RIOGRANDENSIS*' KK 1809



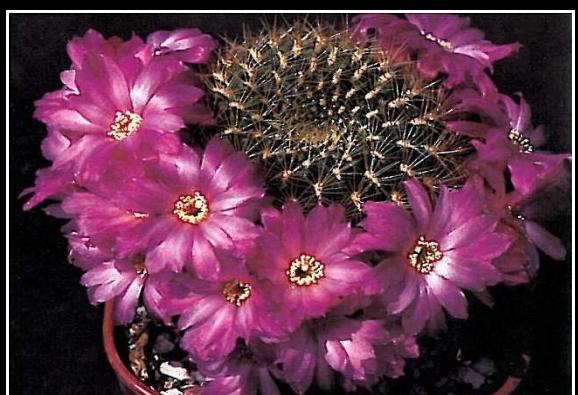
*SULCOREBUTIA AUGUSTINII* HS 152



*SULCOREBUTIA* SP. AFF. *AUGUSTINII* HS 151



*SULCOREBUTIA FLAVISSIMA* HS 48 (WHITE FLOWERED)



RIGHT: *S. FLAVISSIMA* WR 277

and some of its allies



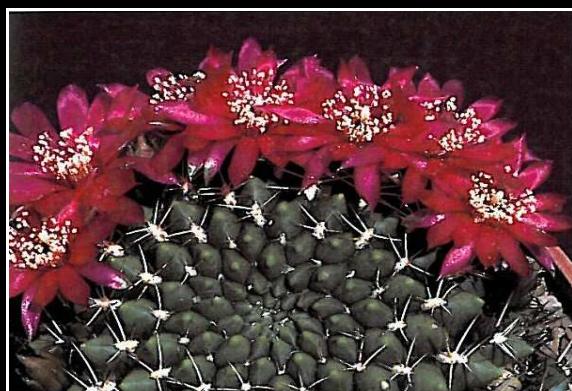
*SULCOREBUTIA MARKUSII*



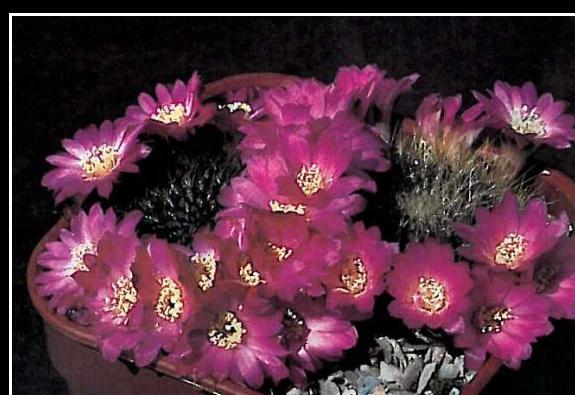
*SULCOREBUTIA MENTOSA*



*SULCOREBUTIA TOROTOROENSIS WR 464b*



*SULCOREBUTIA PURPUREA*



*SULCOREBUTIA SWOBODAE HS 220*



LEFT: *S. SWOBODAE*

another question to which I would like to know the answer; for instance, are there ants for seed dispersal?

In cultivation, with a few exceptions, the proportion of flowers setting seed is usually low or non-existent, in spite of diligent work with cottonbuds or brushes. And the fruit of this genus, low down, dull coloured, and splitting to release the seeds at the base of the plant, implies very local distribution rather than by means such as bird dispersal. Could these be reasons for such diversity in the genus, compared with those where seed is set readily, and/or in bird-attracting fruits, leading to more widespread dispersal and, usually a larger range? There is food for thought.

Enough said, I should like to recommend a few for your attention, some which I think are among the most rewarding to grow. One of the most beautifully



SULCOREBUTIA MENTOSA & S. FLAVISSIMA IN WILLI FISCHER'S COLLECTION.



SULCOREBUTIA ALBISSIMA & S. SANTIAGINIENSIS IN WILLI FISCHER'S COLLECTION.

spined *S. flavissima*. Who was kidding whom? Also, as you can see from another of these group photographs, the variation in colour of the inappropriately named *S. albissima* is generally from yellowish-white to brown, and there is variation from yellow to brown in the soft hair-spined *S. swobodae*. Flower colour is variable too, from a pale lilac to deep magenta, not forgetting of course the white flowered forms of *S. flavissima* and *S. swobodae*.

I find that my enthusiasm for this genus has not waned in the last twenty or more years that I have been interested in it, and I will return to this theme again (if time, God and the editor permit). Meanwhile I should be glad to hear from anyone who can throw any light on the questions posed above about pollination etc.



SULCOREBUTIA SWOBODAE IN WILLI FISCHER'S COLLECTION.

spined groups is that based on *S. mentosa*, including *S. flavissima*, *S. swobodae*, and *S. albissima*, for the differing colouration or thickness of the spines. The CITES *Cactaceae Checklist* (1992) threw five more species into synonymy with *S. mentosa*, viz. *S. augustinii*, *S. markusii*, *S. purpurea*, *S. torotoroensis*, *S. unguispina*, and photographs of all but the last one of these (which I have not managed to obtain) are also reproduced here, but I still wonder whether or not they have anything to do with the first mentioned group above.

The photographs of groups of these plants in the collection of Willi Fischer give some indication of their variability. Note particularly the yellow spined plant among the similarly labelled but standard nearly black spined *S. mentosa*, and the almost black spined plant among the similarly labelled but standard yellow

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