



Cacti, a Good Choice for Hill Country Gardeners

by Howard Platte, HCMG



Cacti represent a unique opportunity for the gardener. Some people loathe these prickly plants and wonder why anyone in their right mind would ever consider having them on their property. Well I like these prickly plants and here is why.

They have unusual shapes: small and large flat pads, short and long cylindrical stems, minute globular forms to huge majestic columns that reach heights to over fifty feet. Many have gorgeous blooms: often larger than the plant from which they grow, delicate structures, a fantastic array of color, and often very colorful fruit.

Last but not least, they require very little care making them ideal for the Hill Country. Where can you find a family of plants that thrives on abuse and lack of attention? Cacti are the answer. They can get by on just a little water and grow in poor soils in day-after-day of heat, heat, heat. There are many cold hardy cacti to choose from that will provide an opportunity to develop an outstanding cactus garden. Cacti are found in the range from 56°N to 52°S (from southern Canada down into the upper 80% of Argentina and Chile!). How about freezing temperatures? It is true that many cacti will not tolerate freezing temperatures. If you like these temperature touchy cacti, invest in a greenhouse or when fall arrives bring them in doors until the last threat of freezing temperatures leaves in mid April.



Well, what are cacti? All cacti are dicots, that is, two seed leaves rather than one seed leaf found in monocots. Dicots rule the plant world with about 80% of all plant species. The cactus family consists of about 125 genera with more than 1500 species belonging to a large group of plants known as succulents. Succulents have anatomies that have become specialized, enabling them to survive drought. Water is stored in the fleshy tissue of the stems, leaves and roots. Cacti take this water storing characteristic one step further. They don't have leaves and have a relatively small surface area in proportion to their stem volume. Additionally, they have a waxy outer layer, which inhibits water transpiration. The primary difference between cacti and the rest of the succulent families is the "areole." Areoles are bud-like pads on the cactus plant from which spines and flowers emerge. Some cacti have few or no spines and flowers can be diminutive, 1 to 2 mm diameters, or display huge gaudy blooms. Blooming occurs at different times from early spring, throughout the summer, into the early fall. Thus the gardener, through judicious selection, can have various cacti blooming during a six to seven month span.

The next step is to select several cacti for your cactus/rock garden. In Texas alone, there are 20 or 21 genus of cactus and over 100 species/varieties. About 80% of these cacti reside in the Trans-Pecos region of Texas. Most of them are cold hardy. There are vendors and growers throughout Texas. Also, you can join in the fun at the monthly meeting of the Kerr County Cactus & Succulent Society (7:00 PM on the third Tuesday of each month) at the library meeting room. At each meeting it is possible to obtain various cacti and other succulents. You can go on field trips to ferret out many very interesting cacti. However, this is the least desirable way to build a collection, since many cacti are rare and often protected by the Endangered Species Act.

Now comes the next obvious step. You have several cacti and have selected an area, with excellent drainage for the upcoming planting, but you don't have time to plant them. Have no fears, cacti can remain in a dry place away from the sun for many weeks and still bound into life after planting. If you decide to keep your cactus in pots, it is wise to repot them every two or three years. This allows them to grow faster.



No matter which direction you decide to go, remember the most important aspect of successful cultivation and care of cacti is excellent soil drainage. Do not over water. If you have them in a garden setting, generally, let Mother Nature do the work. Off course, cacti growing in pots will dry out more quickly. A moisture gauge reading of DRY indicates a drink of water is needed. Often this means about once each week to twice per month. A weak fertilizer solution can be used no more than once each month during the growing season. From late fall to early spring, do not water. Cacti prefer to hibernate/rest for several months before their next growth and flowering season begins. As your cacti grow and bloom, it may be possible to obtain seeds to propagate additional cacti plants. It is also quite easy to propagate new plants via cuttings.

Finally, the cumbersome subject of naming cacti. This is a very difficult subject. I have avoided delving into taxonomy of cacti for over seven years. I just seem to have a mental block against all those Latin names, probably caused by my struggle through four years of high school Latin. However, I am starting to give taxonomy a try and plan to do more in naming plants on my little piece of Hill Country heaven.