

# Gymnocalyciums, Argentina, Brazil & Uruguay

By Wendell S. (Woody) Minnich

Gymnocalycium is one of the most popular of all of the South American genera. Most everybody during the development of their cactus and succulent collections has eventually ended up with a sizable assortment of this wonderful genus. The genus is named for its naked, spineless floral calyx, thus; Gymno (naked) calycium (calyx). Their large flowers are often very beautiful in form and color, ranging from white to yellow to red and pink. When the flowers are fertilized, the naked calyx normally develops into a large colorful fruit which becomes very attractive to the various little creatures (mice, birds, lizards, etc.) who love to eat these succulent morsels. These little creatures also play a big part in the seed dispersal for many of the Gymno species.

Most of the species are not really large and thus they make perfect pot culture specimens. Their colors, shapes and unique spine arrangements often make them outstanding geometric treasures. Because many of the species live in harsh conditions, they have often evolved as geophytes, with colors that match their soils and surroundings. Generally, their shapes are globose to sub-globose and flat to depressed, thus allowing them to survive in regularly arid and usually bright environments. When it comes to spines, many of the Gymnos are very heavily armed to thus protect them from numerous herbivores. Some of the flat, tap rooted species, have the most attractive pectinate spine arrangements, often looking like spiders or fingers clinging to their bodies. Probably the most desired aspect of the Gymnos is that they almost all make ideal and easy plants for cultivation. For the serious collector, who often wants every species of a particular genus, Gymnos are textbook. A complete assortment, of all of the Gymno species and forms, can be grown in a relatively small greenhouse or in an appropriately sized outdoor setting.

All of the Gymnocalyciums come from South America. Although, the great majority of the species are found in central to northern Argentina. In the surrounding countries of Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil and Uruguay, one can find many of the more subtropical species. These species generally like a higher degree of humidity and slightly lower day time temperatures. Over the years, many serious field explorers, each with their own perspectives, have roamed all of these adjacent countries. Thus, the taxonomy is slightly confused, and often many synonyms for the same species are offered in the trade. A few of the numerous pioneers who have searched for and discovered many of the taxa include; Frederick Ritter, Leopold Horst, Roberto Kiesling, Ferrari, Backeberg, and Schuetz.

If you like the Gymnocalyciums, hopefully this presentation will give you a good feel for how and where they grow, as well as, much of the variation within the genus.