

THE MOST DANGEROUS CACTUS

The Cacti etc online discussion list has been enlivened lately with several good discussions inspired by Carol Wujcik, Fallbrook, CA. One was a thread about the "most dangerous cactus." Of course, most of those posting selected various opuntias as the most lethal. Myron Kimmach, emeritus director of the Huntington Botanical Gardens and also emeritus editor of the *Cactus & succulent journal*, contributed several stories:

"Harry Johnson [famous southern California nurseryman] told me once that he suspected a regular customer of snitching cuttings or plants when she walked along the benches in his glasshouses. One day he suddenly appeared, whereupon she turned away and seemed to be putting something down inside her blouse. As Harry approached, he saw that the plants beside her were *Opuntia macrodasys*. He engaged her in conversation and, it being a hot and sweaty day, her discomfort increased the longer they talked. I don't remember what happened next, but he said he didn't scold her, feeling that she was being adequately punished.

"Story 2: in the 1950s, when I worked at the UC Botanical Garden in Berkeley, I had been having trouble with a schoolteacher who tended to step into the cactus beds, often with her very young students, in order to demonstrate something botanical. I had told her that this not only could damage plants but was potentially dangerous for the children. One day I came out of the glasshouse to see her standing in one of the beds once again. As I came to up give her another lecture I saw she was handing out something to all the little kids—they were flower buds of that nasty opuntia. Some of the kids were already starting to cry. I never saw that teacher in the garden again.

"Last story: a few years later I was in my office at the Huntington when a young Asian couple entered. They did not speak English, but it was easy to see what the problem was—the woman's face and arms were rather densely covered with a yellow fur of—you guessed it—glochids of that darned opuntia. As the man carried a camera, and as we did not have any of the opuntias close to the paths, I guess that she had walked into one of the beds to post for a picture. (Not knowing English, they had ignored the signs reading "Keep to paths".) Apparently she had fallen face-down into a large specimen of the opuntia. I got some sticky-tape, applied it to an arm and then pulled off the tape—none of the glochids came out. We sent her down to a local clinic where we sent injured employees. I talked on the phone to one of the clinic personnel, who said they usually dealt with such spines by using a safety razor to cut them off at skin level, though the irritation would continue for some time."

Dave Ferguson, a well-known New Mexico grower and writer on cacti, contributed an opuntia story: "It was an *Opuntia microdasys* (chestnut red glochids) that I had growing in a wide shallow clay pot years ago. At the time, I occasionally brought a few things such as this particular cactus into the kitchen on particularly cold nights in winter. This was one such night. It was a quick incident (took at most a few seconds), but the results haunted me (and one of my cats) for weeks afterward.

"The cat in question was a young chunky long-haired gray tabby that was exceptionally playful. She liked to chase and fetch milk jug rings (the little plastic rings that come off when you open the lid). I need to set the stage a bit here, too. The cactus was in a corner on the floor next to the kitchen table (opposite side of the table from the hall that ran the length of the house.) The cat was batting and throwing (with her mouth—funny to watch) a ring up and down the hallway, racing about 90 mph back and forth. I was in the kitchen doing something or other at the time. The cat came barreling down the hall behind her thrown ring, which landed on the table (oh, and there was a large piece of paper on the table). The cat leapt onto the table, hit the paper, slid across the table, and landed (you guessed it) in the middle of the respectably large opuntia, producing an explosion/cloud of red glochids.

"I tried combs, the vacuum cleaner, sticky sheets of paper, all sorts of things, but only ended up with glochids all over the house, all over me, in the furniture, in the bed, in the laundry, all over the cat, and everywhere else. It was really an itchy miserable period, but eventually the glochids were all dealt with. Believe it or not, I still like the plant (it wasn't the plant's fault), and still grow it. But it never comes inside the house anymore—in fact, it resides in the outdoor plantings at the Botanical Garden in Albuquerque now."

Yes, most of us have opuntia glochid stories ...

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PLANTS USUALLY RECOGNIZED AS WINTER GROWERS

Aeonium, Adromischus, Aloe, Anacampseros, Argyroderma, Bulbine, Conophytum, Crassula, Dinteranthus, Dioscorea, Dudleya, Gibbaeum, Haworthia, Pelargonium, Peperomia, Portulacaria, Sarcocaulon, Senecio, Tylecodon.

- ✓ Keep your winter growers in bright light. This is especially important for winter growing mesembs.
- ✓ Do not let the soil become totally dry during dormancy. Dormancy means watering less but not withholding water altogether.
- ✓ Do not transplant winter growers in summer.
- ✓ Do not take cuttings of these plants in summer.
- ✓ Do not apply fertilizer in summer when the plants are dormant.

These are general guidelines, of course. Long-time growers have probably broken these "laws" at times. Sometimes it doesn't matter; sometimes it does.

Plants in winter: Master grower Thomas Schwink, Indianola, Iowa, writes in an old issue of *Amateur's digest*: "I agree that total dryness for a long period can be harmful but some of us are not able to provide light in the winter months and dryness can be better than etiolation. All of my plants are kept in my dark basement during cold weather and receive no water at all for 5-7 months. This is really too long to keep them totally dry, especially the small ones, but it is better than the etiolation that can result if they are watered when kept in darkness. A few plants, mostly small ones, simply do not develop new feeding roots and eventually die after watering is resumed when light is again available. The losses are very minimal however if the soil is not allowed to get too dry while new roots are growing. My plants are all cacti except for a few lithops."

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