Home Grown
Cactus tips from a master grower

An interesting selection of high-altitude, cold-hardy opuntioids and a few other oddities.

Puna clavarioides

In cultivation *Puna clavarioides* takes on a much different character than its wild brethren. To grow the plant like it is in habitat we would need to start out with a seed and a deep pot, since this strange and wonderful plant does something few cacti do: when the seed germinates it throws down a root first thing, and when the root gets deep enough it begins to make a tuber to store water for hard times. (Life in habitat is hard all the time). The part of the root above the tuber becomes what is called the neck, which connects the deep, tuberous roots to the above-ground heads of the plant. Several new cone-shaped stems emerge and grow each year from the top of the neck. At summer's end the underground parts of the plant contract, and since the stems cannot enter the soil, they break off, shrivel and get blown away.

In cultivation we use relatively shallow pots, so the plants do not develop the long neck of habitat plants, and furthermore, their deciduous nature is not realized, because conditions in cultivation are rather too luxurious. Individual stems can be rooted down in a small pot (be careful that the soil does not stay wet long, which can rot the cutting). After rooting it will not be necessary to pot up again until the original pot swells out of shape from the pressure of the burgeoning root within, although it may be necessary to cut the old pot away so as not to damage the tuber. If you water often, the heads will never fall off, and in time you can get quite a large clump. My largest plant is 25 cm across on its own roots, though I have seen even larger grafted plants.

Individual stems are 1–6 cm across (though the larger heads are kind of monstrose) and covered with carpet of very small, mostly pectinate (comb-like) spines. The flowers (to 4 cm across fully open) normally emerge from the sides of the heads, though I have had flowers form on the flat or concave surfaces as well.

These plants appreciate as much light as possible, but then they need free airflow so as not to get too hot. Outside, but under cover, they will take 20°F (or more) of frost. Keep them dry over the winter and do not be heavy handed with water in the summer; they should be allowed to dry completely between waterings. For more on this amazing plant, consult the excellent article that appeared in the May–June, 2003 issue of this magazine.