For years there have been debates concerning the correct name of the genus, which boasts the cacti with the most ribs. Most American growers use the extravagantly long name *Echinofossulocactus* for this complex of many-ribbed plants, while Europeans have taken up the more correct name, *Stenocactus*, which is nowhere near as cool. In the 1980s David Hunt (the master lumpers) decided that the name *Echinofossulocactus* was first used to describe what we now call *Echinocactus platyacanthus*, making the name a synonym, therefore, of *Echinocactus* and leaving the later-published name *Stenocactus* (**steno** = narrow) for the plants that so many still call *Echinofossulocactus*. The name is a combination of Greek and Latin (**echino** = spiny, hedgehog; **fossu** = ditch or trench), but the common name, Spiny Brain Cactus is at least as descriptive—and three syllables shorter.

Members of the genus are easy to recognize by their wavy ribs and broad, often papery spines. Only one, *E. coptonogonus*, looks out of place with only 10–15 ribs, but it is distinctive and memorable, and its spines and flowers are a good match with the rest. *E. erectocentrus* wins the prize for most ribs (up to 120!), and the others fall somewhere in between.

No one can agree on how many species should be recognized in the genus. The new cactus lexicon lists eight, Anderson has ten, and Backeberg (the master splitter) recognized 32. But the variability of the plants throughout their range in northern Mexico make delineation of the species difficult, and no one has troubled to formally recognize the many forms in cultivation. The flowers are maddeningly similar to one another, even on plants that look vastly different. They come in three basic colors: white (usually with a pink to violet midstripe), pink (also with a violet midstripe), and yellowish (with no violet stripe, but possibly with a darker yellow band).

Cultivation usually presents no problems. In fact, these are delightful plants popular with beginners (and really anyone who sees them). Only a standard cactus mix is needed, and for best spine growth and to keep the bodies globular to cylindrical the plants should get as much light and heat as you can provide. I give them a pot about the diameter of the plant body (without the spines) or half way between body size and spine spread, depending on if the spines are really sticking out from the body or if they are mostly upright and hugging it.

Flowering is early and reliable. I don’t think of *Echinofossulocactus* plants as true winter bloomers, but they are some of the first cacti to bloom in the spring. Perhaps their early bloom time is related to the elevations at which they grow, but they still wait till at least the end of February or the beginning of March to really put on a show. If the flowers are pollinated (transfer pollen between the flowers of two different plant using a small paintbrush) you can expect seedpods that are cylindrical to round. By early summer the pods will dry and split, and seed will kind of ooze out the side, surrounded by a foam-like substance which slowly hardens as it dries from the outside in, sometimes taking a month or more to harden around the still-ripening seeds. Some plants throw offsets, and these can be removed and grown on as new plants. Others, in my experience, never branch, and the only way to propagate them is by seed.

In late winter, if we have a nice sunny spell here in California’s Central Valley, I will give the plants a light watering, and then begin watering...