It’s nice when plants so beautiful come with no extra cultivation challenges, and really no special treatment is required to keep most astrophytums happy. A regular well-drained soil mix, drenching waterings during the spring and summer followed by enough time for the pot to dry out completely, and a dry winter are all that’s required. The plants can take temperatures down to 25°F if kept dry. Good light and a little fertilizer in your acidified water will promote frequent flowering throughout the summer (astrophytums are, in the main, repeat bloomers). And check the flowers for a sweet scent, which often is quite strong the first day, but may fade thereafter. Not all species have scented flowers, but it’s nice to discover ones that do.

In recent years all manner of named crosses have come along, but most look more or less like ‘Super Kabuto’ with variations in the amount and pattern of flocking. It is probably superfluous to give each individual plant a name, as they certainly don’t breed true or propagate vegetatively readily. But crossing astrophytums is easy and fun, and aside from fancy flocking, you tend to get a relatively high percentage of variegated plants among the progeny. Even monstrose seedlings are not uncommon. Hybridization is simply a matter of transferring pollen from one flower to another using a Q-tip or paintbrush, and with Astrophytum the seeds are particularly easy to harvest. As the plump round fruit ripens, its thin skin becomes reddish, soft, and begins to tear. Normally at this stage you can lift the fruit from the plant and squeeze the shiny brown seeds into a coin envelope for storage. The seeds are large enough to need a bit of soil or coarse sand to hold them down when sowing, and they will germinate readily within a week of being kept very moist. In two years most will be flowering size.

Be careful! The flocking (those nice white spots on the plant body) rubs off, and although some plants will grow new felt in time, it never looks as good as the original. Repotting is only necessary when the plant becomes obviously too big for its current digs, and some plants can live for years in the same size pot. Once the body or spines stretch over the rim, you can pot up. But don’t go for too big a pot. Astrophytums tend to do best in a pot just an inch larger than the body’s diameter. It is also easy to accidentally remove flocking while repotting, so be careful how you handle the plants.

Plants with flocking can take more intense sunlight, since the white spots filter and reflect the sun. Nude or sparsely flocked plants may want some shade, and without it the plants will tend to turn yellow, flush red, or even burn. Go overboard on the shade, though, and the plants will etiolate (elongate) unnaturally.

These plants want acidic water to grow well. Alkaline water can even make them shrink—you might notice your plant’s ribs get sharper as the space between them gets deeper, and in time the ribs will become curved as they collapse in on themselves. Acidic water is a must. In my conditions, which tend to be rather dry, astrophytums have shown no adverse affects with temperatures down to the low 20s. But if you live where the humidity is 50% or more most of the time, it would be best to keep the plants above 35°F.