Frailea is a genus of small South American cacti. Most species are easy to grow and are great beginner’s plants. A representative collection can easily be grown on a tabletop. They are extremely easy to grow from seed and often reach flowering size within a year and almost always within two. The spines are soft making them easy to handle and the bodies come in shades of dark green, purple and brown (Fig. 1). In spite of all there is to recommend them they are under-represented in collections and on show tables, and surprisingly under-studied and under-explored in the field.

There are about a dozen to possibly twenty species of Frailea, although there are far more names described in the literature than there are accepted species. Recent authors disagree on some of the species and subspecies. Most of them are variable and have subspecies and varieties that encompass many of the older described species. New plants are still being discovered and appear on seed lists with only nearby towns or road crossings listed. Many of these will turn out to be varieties or local forms of existing taxa, but a few will be new.

Frailea has a wide distribution in Eastern South America stretching from Southern Columbia through Bolivia and Brazil into Northern Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay. The plants are small with heads often less than an inch across. The genus was once considered close to Parodia, but recent genetic work has shown that as likely as originally thought.

In habitat, this genus is generally short lived, with an average plant living only a few years before succumbing to predators, rot, or drought. The plants generally stay very small, from not much bigger than a nickel to an inch or so in diameter. When grown in pots, protected from predators, disease and drought, two interesting things happen. The first is that they grow to enormous size. Single heads can get as large as three inches, and clumping species can fill a six inch pot with remarkable speed. The second is that they lose control of their meristems. The meristem is the center of new tissue growth, normally at the center top of the plants. As they age, normally solitary species start producing pups, sometimes with great abandon. It’s not unusual to see an old plant producing a set of pups, some normal, some not. Pups are usually produced at areoles, but occasionally are produced internally to the body of the plant, eventually erupting through the side, like something from the movie Alien. Even in cultivation, these are not long lived plants. Five to eight years is about the most you should expect, even with careful cultivation, although twice that is not unheard of. Fortunately, propagation from pups and from seed is easy.

The flowers of Frailea are all yellow. They require bright sunlight in order to open and usually do so only in the afternoon. One of the oddities of Frailea is that the genus is cleistogamous. That means that the flowers will self-pollinate even if they don’t open. If insufficient sunlight is available for the flowers to open the flowers self-fertilize and produce fruit and seeds. This is a great strategy for survival; self-reliance always pays survival dividends, but it makes the plants even harder to find for the plant-seeker in habitat. It has obvious advantages. In regions where climate is variable, with some good years and some bad, self-fertilization ensures the production of seeds and the preservation of the species. The figure of the Frailea pygmaea shows volunteer seedlings growing around