

The Weekly Plant 21 June 2016

Common names: night-blooming cereus, queen of the night

Scientific name: several plants go by these common names: *Peniocereus greggii* (native to Arizona) and *Epiphyllum* species and hybrids

Common name: torch cactus, hybrid torch cactus

Scientific name: *Trichocereus* hybrids

Discussion

June 18, 2016 was “Bloom Night” at Tohono Chul, the one night of the year when all the Queen of the Night bloom in unison. This cactus looks like a dead stick for 364 days of the year. On that one other day, as the sun sets, the flowers open, staying only until hit by the sun the next day. Nature, of course, is not as perfect as man’s poetic wonderings, so there are always a few early birds and a few lagers. Still the synchronized blooming is quite amazing.

Queen of the night (*Peniocereus greggii*) is native to southern Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and adjacent Mexico. The flowers are pollinated by a night-flying hawk moth. A reddish fruit soon forms and the seeds are eventually spread by fruit-eating birds. Additional photos, including a time-lapse video of a flower opening, can be seen [here](#). For a 2nd video, visit the Tohono Chul facebook page.

There are a number of cactus with flowers that open at night. This leads to confusion, as all would deserve the name night-blooming cereus or queen of the night (a “cereus” is a cactus whose flowers form on the side, rather than the end, of the stems). The most widely available are plants known as “Epis”, short for *Epiphyllum*, the genus to which they belong. Native to tropical Central and South America, they grow in jungles, perching on other plants for support. They have very flat stems that will remind you of Christmas cactus. Grow them as houseplants for they cannot tolerate frost. For more info, visit Epiphyllum Society of America [website](#).



There is a third group of night-blooming cactus, well known especially in the Tucson area. These are the torch cactus, *Trichocereus* hybrids and species. Native to Peru and Argentina, these cacti have been hybridized by the former owners of B&B Cactus (on Speedway west of Freeman) and Mark Dimmitt (ASDM). The resulting hybrids are landscape-worthy cactus that produce gorgeous flowers several times a year and that can tolerate Tucson’s temperature extreme. This year, several torch cactus bloomed this past Sunday and Monday night, providing excitement for early morning walkers. Observations on Tuesday morning suggest the recommendation (see this [article](#)) to plant in some shade is valid. The only plant with fully open flowers at about 8 on Tuesday morning was the one in the shade!

Above left: Epis, also called orchid cactus, flower and form. Note greenhouse environment.

Right: red-blooming torch cactus - fallen & faded flowers & new flower buds

Far right: torch cactus in shade



Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey unless otherwise indicated.



Peniocereus greggii - The Queen. Photo by Dr. J. Menzel, from CalPhotos website. Below: fruit of Peniocereus taken at Saguaro East

