

The Occasional Weekly Plant

24Jun2018

Common names: spinystar, common beehive cactus, pincushion cactus

Scientific name: *Escobaria vivipara* or *Coryphantha vivipara*¹

In our Community: in my yard and hopefully in those of others who provided a home for our rescued cactus.

Discussion

Bill McCourt noticed this plant first and sent me a photo asking for ID (see photo, top right). Without the fruit, your first guess might be *Mammillaria* (called pincushion cactus also). The plant was small and whitish, just like a *Mammillaria*. But oh those fruit, they were nothing like *Mammillaria* (see photo bottom right). Not only was the fruit on Bill's plant the wrong shape and the wrong color for *Mammillaria*, it was in the wrong place - on top of the cactus, not on the side.

So, to the books (or the websites). The Flora of North America Project (FNA - an effort to provide information on all native and naturalized plants in North America north of Mexico) had completed the cactus volume, so I started with the on-line key it provided (you can find the key [here](#)). That got me to *Coryphantha*. Further digging into some books, with a confirming text to my friends at the UA Herbarium, got me to *Coryphantha vivipara*, one of the most widespread cactus in North America. It ranges far north, even into Canada, the only non-prickly pear cactus to do so² (you can see photos of the plant in Saskatchewan [here](#)).

Spinystar is an extremely variable species, as you might expect of one that ranges from Mexico to Canada. In Arizona it is found throughout the state except in the hottest areas in the southwest. It is often single-stemmed, up to 8 inches tall, though it can form clumps.

The pink flowers of spinystar appeared in my yard about a week after our 1.8" rain; the species is listed as potentially flowering spring to late summer. These flowers are large (2+ inches across)³ when compared to our common, local *Mammillaria* (*M. grahamii* flowers are about 1 inch wide). Spinystar flowers are always at the top of the plant, not the side.

Since FNA was published, experts have moved this species from the genus *Coryphantha* to the genus *Escobaria*. The two groups are very similar. In Arizona if a small, whitish cactus has pink flowers with a white stigma at the very top of the plant, it is most likely an *Escobaria*.

¹ Currently *Escobaria* is accepted, though you will certainly still see *Coryphantha*. The difference between the genera is the presence or absence of pits on the seeds, a detail I will leave to the experts.

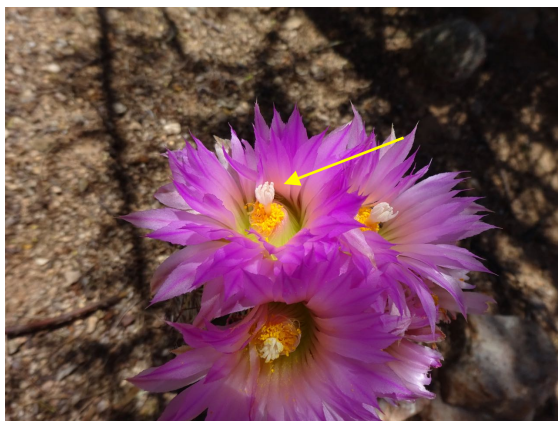
² P. Breslin et al. 2017. Field Guide to Cacti and Other Succulents of Arizona.

³ The flowers make this a wildlife plant. Insects visit the flowers. As I found to my dismay, roundtailed ground squirrels enjoy nibbling the flowers.



Top: original photo of *Escobaria* from Bill McCourt with fruit on top of plant, taken Jan. 2018.

Bottom: *Mammillaria* with fruit on the side.



L to R: Flower close-up showing white stigma (arrow); form of plant in flower; close-up showing tubercles (the green jelly-bean shaped protrusions) with furrow (arrow), a characteristic of this genus.

Photos and text by Mary Welch-Keesey; Photo of *Escobaria* fruit by Bill McCourt