

Practical Small Cacti Malaysia

Keep a cactus collection alive for years in the tropics. Enjoy their flowers too.



The following piece is part of a collection of writings published on the Practical Small Cacti Malaysia site.

Introduction to the Website

The above picture was taken in Klang Valley, Malaysia. If you live in a country with a hot and humid tropical climate like Malaysia, and would like to grow cacti like the one above, then this website will be useful to you.

In 2017, I've enjoyed cactus flowers in January, February, March, April... well, every month from January to December. In 2018, I've enjoyed cactus flowers in January, February, March, April... well, you get the idea¹.

This is in a dusty suburban part of Klang Valley, close to highways and hypermarkets, and not in one of the cooler highland areas. The plants are kept by the side of a house, sheltered from rain. There is no greenhouse or any kind of climate-controlled facility. Care of the plants is imperfect. Bug control is limited to using a water-soluble insecticide spray that one can get from any supermarket – I have sworn off agricultural pesticides years ago. What I do is a *reasonable minimum*; the results you can see in the pictures.

1 Based on digital pictures of cactus flowers where each flower is counted only once. There was at least one flower in each month from February 2016 to November 2020, or 58 consecutive months (so far).



There are just two flowers in the above picture of the same plant... because it is a different bunch of flowers. This picture was taken in the same month, 25 days before the first picture. No magic potion was used². Actually, this is a species of cactus that is quite willing to flower in a tropical climate when it is of mature size and in its growing season. This species is not quite small and dainty, but a mature specimen³ of good size is rugged and tough enough to survive imperfect care. At one point, the above specimen was even left outdoors, in the sun and rain, for multiple years.

² It does need adequate nutrition though. Not magic, just science. More about that later.

³ *Juvenile* specimens are less tough. It is the *mature* specimens that are the hard-to-kill plants.



These grow pretty well too, and they are moderately easy to grow in the tropics⁴ – up to a certain point. Then it gets a bit complicated. This website will tell you all about the complications. If you are able to deal with the complications without losing all your plants then it would be possible to sustain a collection for many years. Healthy, growing plants of good size will produce red flowers.

How does one get to this point? This is the reason for the creation of this website: *to enable others to get to this point*. Thus:

The purpose of this website is to communicate all the knowledge needed to enable urban gardeners living in a hot tropical climate to enjoy the same kind of success.

‘Success’ here means keeping a collection of healthy plants and sustaining the collection over many years. To achieve success we must learn how some cacti behave and grow and react to care and feeding strategies. It means not buying plants and then see them shrink and grow weak. It means not having to say that you end up killing your cactus plants all the time. And if you grow the species shown in the pictures, and grow them well, you will be rewarded with many flowers.

⁴ Oh, most sources will say this species is terribly easy to grow. But then some will also mention in passing that certain species of this genus invariably grow weak and die. Why? This is part of the ‘complication’ that we will address.



This one took many years to get to this point. If you can keep plants healthy, one day they may surprise you. This species has a very hard skin⁵, so it's probably in no hurry to produce flowers.

Are there a lot more pictures of other species of cacti in bloom? No, I'm afraid many species really need that winter's rest before they will flower⁶. Although there will be plenty of pictures of cacti in bloom, not every species will grow awesomely and bloom in a hot and dusty tropical urban garden. Also, we can't easily cultivate all types of cacti and have them look perfect. In the tropics, there is no winter season to slow insects down. Cacti with soft skins are big juicy targets for insects *all the time*. That's why I use the word *practical*. Being practical here is the strategy of doing what works given limited resources.

Urban gardeners cannot expend the same amount of time and effort on growing their plants compared to expert growers. We are not going to recommend building a greenhouse, for instance. But professionals grow almost perfect plants all the time, witness the tens of millions of specimens in 2 inch pots that are offered for sale each year. While there is much to learn from professional horticultural practices, this site will only discuss things that are necessary from the point of view of an urban gardener in a tropical country. We will not discuss things that one can do with a big budget, plenty of time and effort (or manpower or automation) and horticultural chemicals. Instead, picture an urban gardener in a tropical country who has limited resources. The question is, what do we need to do to maintain a collection of cactus plants well over a period of say, 10 years, and maybe get to see some flowers?

5 A *mature* plant of this species has a very hard skin. To get mature plants, you need to keep softer-skinned *juvenile* plants alive and healthy for a long enough time. Understanding and managing such details is an important step along the way to success. More about this later.

6 Or manipulation of daylight or night time hours and/or temperature, which is why the pots of *Kalanchoe blossfeldiana* hybrids on sale are in bloom, right on schedule.



Another specimen with a flower. I'm sure cacti enthusiasts with some experience will be able to identify all the plants shown here. It's not rocket science; these are mostly easy-to-grow types (*supposedly*) and plenty of great articles and videos can be found on the Internet. The problem is, successful cultivation of cacti in Malaysia does not seem to be widespread. A case in point: When I last visited Cactus Valley in Cameron Highlands many years ago, it had arguably the best display collection of cacti in Malaysia. But it was manufactured grandeur – the plants were mostly imported, maintenance was uneven, and some plants were in poor condition. So if those guys do not actually know what they are doing, what chance does the average urban gardener in Malaysia have?

If you have tried unsuccessfully to grow cacti in a hot tropical lowland climate, and you are feeling disillusioned, then this website might be of use to you. If you have felt that the usual generic advice given to you by plant sellers is inadequate, then this website has a lot of detailed information about cultivation. We will discuss how to maintain some plants in *great detail*. Not just words, but also plenty of pictures. Not just pictures of specimens with flowers, but also awful pictures of dead or dying specimens. Finally, a weaselly disclaimer from a weasel: The information presented here is not infallible and should not be regarded as scientifically rigorous. I'm just an urban gardener trying to decipher the hows and whys of cactus cultivation in the tropics. Think of the material here as a roadmap to help you in troubleshooting and improving your cacti collection. ♦

Version Information

This is the December 2020 Edition of this document.

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Colophon

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