

## AZTEKIUM RITTERI

By Sue Haffner



Staged by Larry Grammer  
Photograph from the California Cactus Center

*Aztekium ritteri* is one of the most unusual cacti of Mexico, one of those iconic plants that, once seen, can never be forgotten, nor confused with any other cactus.

The plant is depressed-globular in shape, small (to 6 cm.), with 9-11 ribs, which appear quite wrinkled and greenish-yellow to gray in color. Between the normal areole-bearing ribs there are small secondary ribs reaching halfway up the plant. Spines are weak, soon washed or blown away by atmospheric phenomena so that plants are, basically, spineless. Plants in cultivation may display small spines only at the growing point. The flowers are white.

The plant was first described in 1928 (as *Echinocactus ritteri*.) The genus *Aztekium* was erected for it the following year, the name commemorating the notion that the plant's form resembles Aztec carvings. The specific name honors German plantsman Friedrich Ritter (1898-1989). Until the discovery in 1991 of *A. hintonii*, it was the only species in the genus.

*Aztekium ritteri* is native to the northeast Mexican state of Nuevo Leon, in a very specialized habitat restricted to 3 sites in a single valley. Site 1 is a steep, narrow limestone canyon with nearly vertical sides. Most of the plants occur on the steeper north side in shaly limestone plates, the plates aligned

vertically and perpendicular to the cliff surface with fine clay-like material filling the cracks in between them. The plants grow in association with tiny mosses and lichens. Site 2, on the southern edge of the valley is similar, except that the rocks there seem to be gypsum. Site 3, discovered in 1984, is in the eastern end of the valley, where the plants are found on vertical north-facing cliffs that consist of mud and rounded limestone rocks compacted into a firm conglomerate. The site is near an old road; a new road lies above the cliffs, leading to fears that the area could be destabilized by landslides. Those who have visited the sites report that accessible plants have been either gathered by collectors or predated by animals, but those higher up are safe, given that the shale cliffs are quite treacherous for both humans and goats.

Elton Roberts writes in a September 2007 email: “24 years ago when I moved here to Ripon I had a really nice *Aztekium ritteri*. It was a 6-headed plant. It was in fine health and you could see growth on it every year—that is ‘til I moved here. That fine plant died from my not discovering what was causing all my plants to stop growing and slowly trying to die. I have to assume that *Aztekium ritteri* was more sensitive to alkaline water than a lot of plants, as it died in the almost 3 years it took to learn about alkaline water. All I have now are grafted plants ... The plants are very slow growing so it is not easy to grow a plant to any size in less than about 50 years. I have several plants that are grafted and on a graft the plants grow quite fast. A single head can be off-setting in a year’s time or less ... On a graft the plant blooms several times a year. This is close to the end of September and it is still blooming and has been for about a month. If you have a plant on its own roots do not give it a very deep container, as it does not have deep roots. Give the plant a fast draining soil and give acidic water. If you have a grafted plant it is protected to some degree by how hardy the graft stock is. If a plant is on its own roots then I would keep it several degrees above freezing.”