

THE COAST BARREL CACTUS

By Sue Haffner



Photograph from calflora.net

The coast barrel cactus, *Ferocactus viridescens*, grows in what would seem to be a most unusual place for a cactus—right on the coast, from around Del Mar in San Diego County down into northern Baja California. Its habitat comprises perhaps a hundred miles in length and thirty miles inland. Needless to say, this area is home to several million Southern California residents. Despite that, it is not as well known as its desert counterparts. This is due to its small stature. Less than a foot and a half tall, it is often hidden by taller shrubs. It becomes easier to spot when its red and yellow buds open to reveal bright yellow flowers.

This plant was discussed on the Cacti_etc online list awhile back. Bob Mitchell, from the San Diego area, wrote: “The thing to remember about it is—that it is a winter grower. So, if you have the climate or the cultural conditions now [Sept.] is the perfect time to go to work on it. Un---pot it, clean it as necessary,

examine the roots and remove any dead or diseased ones, and re-pot it in a mix of up to 2/3 pumice and 1/3 sandy loam. In habitat, the rains start around Thanksgiving and continue off and on until March or so. The days get into the 70's or 80's, and the nights can drop into the high 30's. If you can't provide these conditions, you'll see why *F. viridescens* is regarded as difficult. Otherwise, it's an easy plant to cultivate."

This produced a response from Ralph Peters in New Mexico: "The variability of plant culture always amazes me!! I was unaware that it was a winter grower, and grew it like any-old-cactus in my greenhouse in Albuquerque. That means it grows during the spring and summer, flowers profusely in the late spring, produces a ton of seed which is almost ripe now, and spends the winter shivering in a greenhouse that may go as low as 25F on occasion (daytime highs in the 90s.) For me, the plants grow like crazy (for feros) going from a 5" pot to a 10" pot in 7 years while producing tons of seed. BTW, the seed is (for me) easy to germinate and grow; small volunteer plants show up most years in the pot with "mama" even though I try very hard to collect all the seed. "Neophytes, beware of cultural info!! Climate, growing conditions, quirks of grower, (nearby traffic lights) ... may be important!"

Elton Roberts, writing on his email blog, recommends this species if you want to grow a ferocactus but don't have all the room in the world: "If you want a Ferocactus but have limited space this plant is really a wonderful plant. Come on, I know a lot of *Echinopsis* that take up more room than one large *F. viridescens* ... I have had *F. viridescens* for about eight to ten years and so far with temperatures into the upper teens I have not had any problems with the cold and the plants. If you live where the humidity is high all winter you will want to try and keep the plant above at least 36 F. I keep them powder dry over the winter to make sure. Summers can get into the low 100s F in habitat but usually it is a little milder than that. I give the plants all the light I can without burning them. I have them in my regular soil mix which is a fast draining mix ... The spines are straight to curving but never hooked. The spines are pinkish-rose in color and in time fade to gray. The flowers are 6 cm in diameter, with green petals with a reddish mid-stripe up the petal. In cultivation the plants will bloom several times in a season."

In "Cacti, agaves, and yuccas of California and Nevada," Stephen Ingram describes the habitat of *F. viridescens* as "sea bluffs and hill crests, where it prefers southwest-facing slopes among rocks and well-drained, gravelly loam soils. In addition to its occurrence in chaparral and coastal sage scrub plant communities, coast barrel cactus is also found in valley grasslands on the periphery of vernal pools ... Coast barrel cactus used to be very common within its range, but it is currently in decline due to rapid urbanization, as well as from illegal collecting."