

SENECIO ROWLEYANUS OR STRING OF BEADS

by Sue Haffner

This unique succulent, with its spherical leaves connected by thread-like branches, is always intriguing upon first acquaintance. I remember the first one I ever saw, in a Southern California nursery. It looked like a big bowl of green peas spilling down from its hanging pot. (Only when I got closer did I see that—ack—it was covered with mealybugs.)

Gordon Rowley, in his book "The Succulent Compositae", describes his experience with the species: "About 1950, when I began an interest in succulent Compositae, I saw this plant in the collection of John Measures at Keyston, Northants and realized that it was something new. John was then receiving plants from several collectors abroad, and the only information he could give me was that he thought this had come from his contact in S.W. Africa. Jacobsen, then in process of compiling his Lexikon, did me the honour of naming it after me, which pleased me no end as it turned out to be one of my favourite succulents. But the habitat remained a mystery ... It remained for the



Photo by WindsurfGirl

lynx-eyed John Lavranos some years later to rediscover it in Springbokvlakte, 18 km S. of Kleinpoort, Steytlerville Karoo, in the Eastern Cape."

If you search the Internet for information on this plant, you come up with very little. The only site that discusses it states that it is poisonous, which I hadn't heard before. Rowley addresses this as well: "I was told some years ago that a rumour was flying around succulent circles in America that *S. rowleyanus* was highly poisonous, warning growers off having it in their collections. Eventually this malicious gossip so incensed one courageous lady at a society meeting that, in front of a gasping audience, she seized a plant, tore off a piece and ate it just to prove that it was harmless!" I suspect it didn't taste very good, but that doesn't make it poisonous. Plants have had to evolve a range of defenses in order to survive; one of these is an unappealing taste.

Elton Roberts discussed this plant on his blog in 2008: "Some years ago while outside in the yard I kept getting a whiff of something that smelled like someone was baking

something that is really good to eat. Apple pie with spices came to mind, as did sweet rolls or cinnamon rolls. Yet to me it seemed a bit different also. There was not much in bloom at that time of year. Being the kind of person that I am I searched the tables to see if the smell came from any cactus flowers, but could find nothing ... This happened again and again over about a month's time. One day the smell was really strong or I was extra hungry, turning around I nearly ran into my hanger of *Senecio rowleyanus*. There at eye level was a small cluster of flowers. I think it was the first time I had had the plant bloom. I took a whiff and wow, what a delicious smell! I now have to think that for me the odor is between cinnamon and allspice with cloves mixed in... The plants are blooming now [January 11] and have been for about a month. The flower heads are made up of a bunch of small trumpet shaped flowers in a cluster, not unlike Easter lilies ... I have the plants in my regular soil mix, as the plants are winter growers they do get watered during this time."



Hirt's Houseplants

The really spectacular specimens of this plant are those with multiple hanging stems, sometimes reaching several feet in length. You can also twine the stems around on the soil surface. The plant only produces weak surface roots, so a well draining mix and a shallow container would seem to be called for. It can survive freezing temperatures, as

long as it has overhead protection. Be vigilant against mealybugs. A cultivar with yellow variegation is sometimes seen in the garden shops ("peas with mayonnaise," Rowley says, "if your thoughts incline to food").