

- Suggested story concept
- Researched and wrote story



Cultivating Cacti

Rob Caldwell waters just a few of the many dozen cacti he moves outdoors in summer.

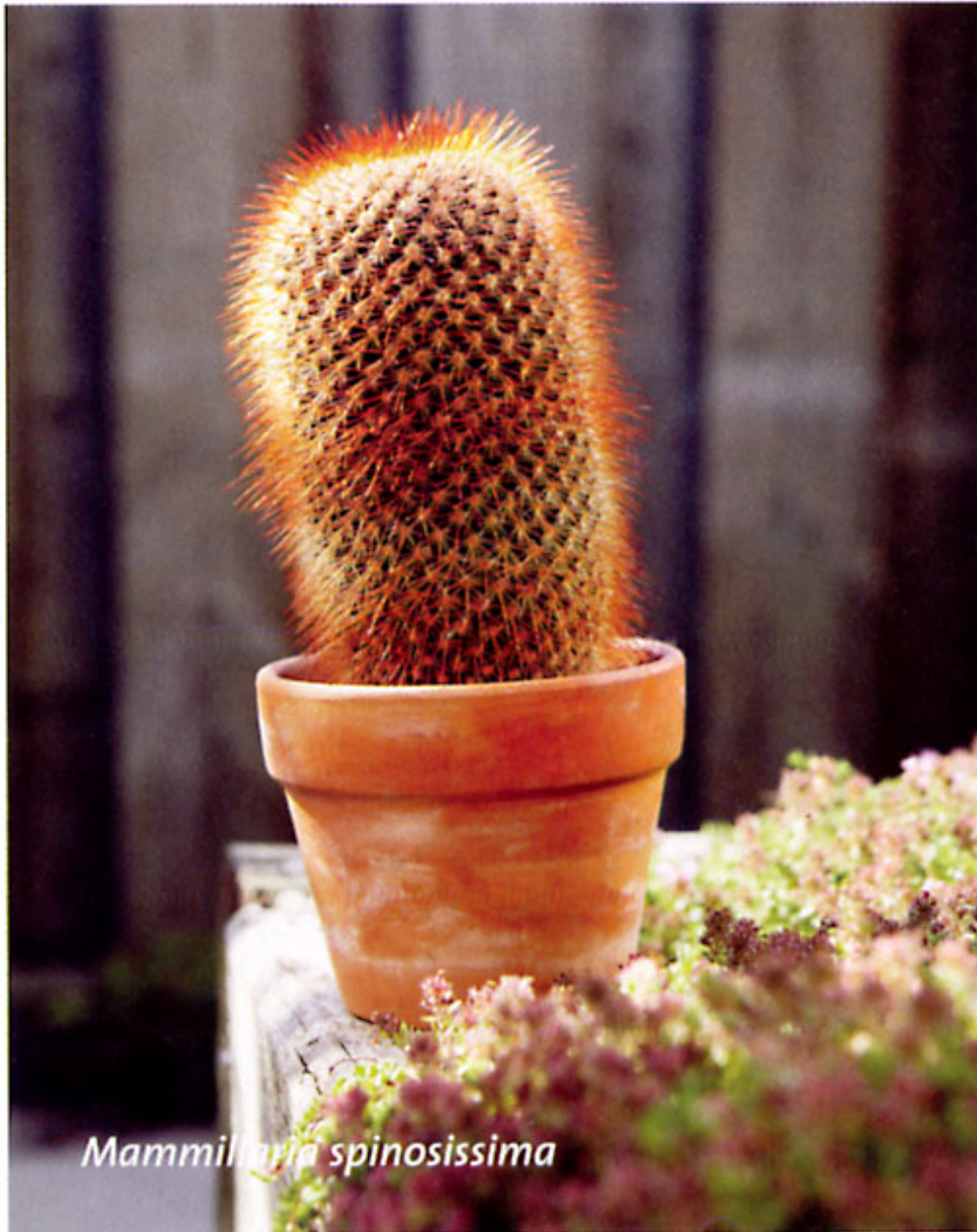
Sharpen your green-thumb skills and learn to grow no-fuss cacti indoors and out.

BY JO CALVERT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL GRAYDON

WWith their amazing architectural shapes – spiked with starbursts, whorls and spirals – and their showy flowers, desert cacti certainly are drama queens. Luckily, they're not as demanding as your average diva so, while they're exciting, they're also no-fuss plants for indoor gardeners.

One fan is Rob Caldwell, manager of information services of the Weston Family Library at the Toronto Botanical Garden (TBG). "I've been growing cacti since I was little, but more seriously ▶



Mammillaria spinosissima



Parodia scopa

in the past 10 years or so," he says. "I've got almost 100 cacti and other succulents at home that have slowly taken over and displaced the other houseplants. They are scattered throughout the house in windows and on a shelving unit in the spare bedroom, and I even keep some in our basement all winter. Luckily, I have a (mostly) tolerant wife. With a young child now, we've had to make sure all of the barbed cacti are out of the reach of curious little hands and that none of the cacti are toxic." **Every summer Rob moves his collection into the backyard where the sun coaxes out bright blooms, providing food for visiting butterflies and bees.**



It's easy to catch Rob's enthusiasm for cacti. Read his growing tips, then go to the TBG library's website (www.torontobotanicalgarden.ca/library/resource_guides_cacti.htm) to learn about good cacti books to buy or borrow from the library, and find links to online cacti stores, guides and groups, as well.

GROWING TIPS

- Choose nursery-grown plants that are well formed, healthy and undamaged.
- Grow potted cacti in a sunny window



Opuntia microdasys

that faces south or west (light is their most important requirement). If you've just brought home a new plant, however, acclimatize it gradually to the direct sun. ➤ Cacti need more water in the summer growing season than during winter dormancy. For most cacti, Rob suggests watering "once a week in the summer

and every 2 to 3 weeks the rest of the year." Never let the pots sit in water. ➤ "Since most cacti grow in meagre soils," says Rob, "they don't need much fertilizer – give them a dose of low-nitrogen fertilizer, cut to one-quarter or one-half strength, every other watering in spring and summer."



Pachypodium lamerei



Astrophytum asterias

➤ When repotting, start with a soil mix designed for cactus. “I like to add some small gravel or grit and/or perlite,” says Rob, “to increase drainage and because the ready-made soil is sometimes too rich.” Move a globe cactus into a pot that’s 2.5 centimetres larger all around, and a columnar cactus into a container with a diameter that’s about half the height of the cactus. Sturdy terra-cotta pots, which help anchor heavy cacti and keep roots from becoming waterlogged, are a good choice. And always use containers with drainage holes. Wear leather gardening gloves and/or wrap spiny plants in newspaper to protect yourself. After repotting, wait for a week or two before watering.

➤ Move tender cacti outdoors after all danger of frost is past. Gradually acclimatize them to the sunlight by moving them out into a shaded spot for longer periods each day for about a week or two, then into a sunny or partly sunny site for the season (unlike hardy varieties growing in the ground, these potted cacti will need watering). Rob moves his into a structure that he can cover with plastic if there is a lot of rain, since most cacti don’t like prolonged periods of soaking. Temporarily sheltering them under a garden table would work just as well.

ROB’S RECOMMENDED LIST FOR BEGINNERS

Astrophytum asterias (sea urchin cactus). Almost extinct in the wild but easily found in stores, this spineless, yellow-flowering cactus resembles a green version of its namesake. It’s susceptible to rot so water it sparingly.

Gymnocalycium/Mammillaria/Rebutia These small globe cacti vary widely in form and colour. With enough light, the latter two flower reliably. Rebutias often form clumps of offshoots.

Opuntia microdasys Rarely flowering when a houseplant, this forms sculptural, paddle-shaped branches dotted with hair-like glochids, rather than spines.

Pachypodium lamerei “Not a true cactus, this slow-growing, spiny succulent from Madagascar is one of my favourites,” says Rob. Keep it indoors if the temperature’s likely to dip below 10 C.

Parodia scopa Eventually this forms a dense bunch of rounded columns. “Very durable if slow growing, one specimen of this is probably the oldest cactus in my collection,” says Rob.

Cold-Hardy Cacti

Cacti may look exotic, but *The Canadian Encyclopedia* lists four spiny native cacti that will thrive outdoors year-round. *Escobaria vivipara* (Zone 3), found across the southern Prairies, is a small pincushion type that produces deep pink flowers in June. Canada also has three yellow-flowering prickly-pear species, which have paddle-shaped branches that bloom in early summer: the low-growing *Opuntia fragilis* (Zone 2), found from Ontario to British Columbia; the larger *O. polyacantha* (Zone 2), found in Saskatchewan and southern Alberta; and *O. humifusa* (Zone 4), a ground-hugging plant endangered in Canada and found only near the Lake Erie shore. Rob also grows a U.S. native, *O. macrorhiza* (Zone 4).

Plant hardy cacti in a sunny spot (against a south-facing wall or bank is ideal) with well-drained soil (mix in gravel and contractor’s sand).

“In the fall,” says Rob, “these cacti will lose water and look shrivelled and almost dead, only to perk right back up once spring returns.” ●