**Cactus of the Year 2018: Echinopsis Chamaecereus**

**The peanut cactus - a homeless world traveller**

When the last peanuts of the winter are all cracked and eaten, the season of peanut cactus begins. In spring, when the plants start to fill with water and grow, it becomes obvious why the peanut cactus got its name. The shape and the spine pattern of the shoots actually remind us of a bunch of freshly harvested peanuts. The name derives from American English, since the peanut cactus has been known in America for quite a long time. The plant itself is indigenous to America as well, to the northwest corner of Argentina, to be more precise. Philippo Silvestri discovered the peanut cactus there more than a hundred years ago and dug out a few plants. In 1905, a colleague botanist by the name of Carlos Spegazzini described the peanut cactus as "a small species of cactus growing in a lawn shaped pattern with slender branches and red flowers" and named the plant "Cereus silvestrii" in honour of its discoverer. Later it became "Chamaecereus silvestrii", the dwarf column of Silvestri, and today it is called "Echinopsis chamaecereus".

The knowledge about the original habitat of this cactus was soon forgotten. The description of the area where it was found is too vague and the site is located in a vast region, which is difficult to access. There have been numerous attempts to find that exact area, but unfortunately they were unsuccessful until today. For this reason, no photographs exist of a peanut cactus in its natural environment. All available pictures of peanut cacti were made of cultivated plants. No one can say with certainty whether and which of today’s peanut cacti still correspond to the original wild form, since the propagation of the original plants has not been documented for a long time. The mere fact that from the first collection of wild plants over 100 years ago, these cacti survived to the present day without any further samples being gathered in the natural habitat is actually a small miracle. The even greater miracle is that they have not only survived, but have spread millionfold throughout the world, either under the protection of their caretakers, or abandoned and surviving by themselves, such as in southern Switzerland.

The peanut cactus owes the capability to make this journey around the world to its extraordinary characteristics: if watered and fertilized regularly, it will thrive without much further care, will grow rapidly and sprout generously. The shoots can easily be detached and will soon develop new roots. The peanut cactus isn’t demanding in terms of location either: it does like sunshine, but will also put up with half-shade and even endures a few degrees below zero in wintertime. After a winter rest, it will blossom in springtime with strong colours and will continue bearing bunches of flowers periodically all through summer and into autumn. Sowing of seeds is also an easy way of propagation.

Considering all these advantages, cacti lovers came up with the idea of cultivating new blossom colours by cross-breeding. Red-orange, yellow and purple have been classic blossom colours for decades. In the meantime, almost every shade of colour is possible – with the exception of blue, green and black - from gentle pastel to bright neon pink. For the last few years, even peanut cacti with two-coloured, mottled or striped flowers have been grown; there is no foreseeable end to the diversity! These varieties in turn are handed on and find new admirers around the globe. Hence, for the peanut cactus the travelling around the world is far from being over!