

Cactus of the year 2022: Teddy Bear Cholla *Cylindropuntia bigelovii*

The trivial name ‘teddy bear cholla’ how this cactus species is called in its home, the Sonoran Desert in North America, refers to its fluffy appearance. But unlike a teddy bear, this cactus is all but fluffy.

Together with the Saguaro cactus (*Carnegiea gigantea*) and the Ocotillo shrub (*Fouquieria splendens*), the teddy bear cholla belongs to the characteristic plants of the Sonoran Desert, where it thrives in mid-range altitudes and always in full sun. It forms richly branched shrubs with a short stem, growing up to 1.50 m high. The straw-yellow thorns reflecting the sunlight intensively give the plants a spectacular impression. These cacti are well and easily recognizable from afar and shape the appearance of the landscape due to their dense stands.

The epithet *Cylindropuntia bigelovii* honours the American doctor and botanist John Milton Bigelov who lived in the middle of the nineteenth century. He sent the cacti he found to the German-American physician and botanist George Engelmann who dealt with them scientifically and also made several first descriptions, including the one of the teddy bear cholla. Teddy bear cholla belongs to the columnar Opuntias, which is referred to by the trivial name ‘cholla’.

The species is very well armed. Its sprouts bare extremely dense thorns. On their surface, they have microscopically small barbs which are covered by a paper-like sheath. Such armed sprouts easily stay on the fur or on the skin of careless animals. Therefore this species is also named ‘golden spined jumping cholla’. This name refers to the fact that the sprouts almost jump onto their victims. The sprouts hardly get off their victims, often after long and painful attempts to remove them. These joints can easily produce roots and grow into new plants – the way this species propagates vegetatively.

In the habitat of teddy bear chollas there live some bird species that chose the thorny thickets as a protection against enemies of their offspring. It’s a wonder of nature how a bird can get into its nest net without being injured by these dangerous cactus thornes!

Mainly from April to June flowers are produced on the ends of the sprouts. Their petals have a pastel yellow-green colour contrasted by the very characteristic intensively green stamens and stigma lobes. The fruit mostly contain only few seeds, which are seldom viable – an adaptation to the predominately vegetative propagation.

The large group of Opuntias generally do not enjoy much popularity among cactus amateurs because many of them become very big, and because all species unpleasantly are very pungent. The species presented here, to which one should avoid, does not make an exception to the rule. Due to its painful spination it is rarely seen in cultivation. If you want to try to cultivate this cactus nevertheless, you should bear in mind its most important demands: much sunlight, warmth, drought and a very

well drained substratum. Anyway caution is needed with this very prickly species! If despite being careful a thorn or rather a whole sprout should hang at the arm, a comb shall help to remove it – no guarantee that this doesn't work out without blood loss...

Who once has the opportunity to see this plant in nature, will grow fond of it, at least a little bit. The recognition as the cactus of the year 2022 should help this species to get more attention.

Text: Dr. Thomas Engel, engel-dr-t@t-online.de