

Press release of the Deutsche Kakteen-Gesellschaft e.V., Schweizerische Kakteen-Gesellschaft and the Gesellschaft Österreichischer Kakteenfreunde

19 October 2024

Cactus of the Year 2025: *Stenocereus eruca*, the Creeping Devil

Stenocereus eruca is unique in the cactus kingdom in its growth behaviour: the main shoot, which can be up to four meters long and up to ten centimetres thick, lies on the ground, and while the shoot tip grows slowly, the rear end of the plant with the original root gradually dies. New roots regularly develop on the underside of the shoots, ensuring the access to water and nutrients. This allows the plants to crawl leisurely but inexorably across the ground.

It is therefore a plant species that moves continuously across the ground throughout its lifespan! This is a reason for the cactus societies of the three German-speaking countries Germany, Austria and Switzerland to choose *Stenocereus eruca* as Cactus of the Year 2025.

The species was officially described in 1889 by Townshend Brandegee, an American botanist. He mentioned that the lying shoots with the shoot tips stretching slightly upwards are reminiscent of giant caterpillars. The "eruca" part of the botanical name means "caterpillar" in Latin and refers to this form of appearance. Instead of "crawling caterpillar", however, the name "creeping devil" has become established for the species in popular parlance, even though there is nothing devilish about it, apart from its impressive spines.

Stenocereus eruca blooms exclusively at night. The flowers, which are up to nine centimetres in size, are white, like those of almost all night-blooming plants, and only bloom for one night. They are mainly pollinated by moths. They then form red, spherical fruits up to four centimetres thick, which are edible.

The habitat of this unique cactus species is the Magdalena Plain in the south of the Mexican peninsula of Baja California, where it grows on sandy areas in close proximity to the Pacific Ocean. The climate there is desert-like and extremely dry, with no more than 100 mm of rainfall per year. In years without precipitation, coastal fog, which is carried far inland by westerly winds, is the only source of moisture and ensures the survival of the plants.

The species used to inhabit huge areas. However, its habitat is increasingly threatened by construction work for the fish and fish canning industry and the acquisition of agricultural land.

The cultivation of the creeping devil is uncomplicated: In the warm season, the species needs a position in full sun with regular watering and occasional fertilizer. The substrate must always dry out completely between waterings, as these desert dwellers cannot tolerate permanently moist substrate. The wintering (October to March) takes place in an absolutely dry and cool place (free from frost). The lying growth form understandably presents a

challenge for cultivation. Balcony boxes are best suited for keeping them: Plants several meters long can be kept in a row in them. However, several helpers are needed for transport in this constellation. The plants can also be trimmed regularly at the end. Since the shoots have formed roots on the underside, the plant can continue to grow immediately in the shortened version.

This species is therefore not suitable for the plant lover who only occasionally keeps some cacti on the windowsill, even though it is a fascinating species with a unique growth behaviour.

Text: Hardy Hübener

Photos:

Photo 1: *Stenocereus eruca* in habitat (Baja California, Mexico). Photo: Manfred Figge

Photo 2: *Stenocereus eruca* in the Huntington Botanical Garden. Photo: Hardy Hübener

Photo 3: Flower of *Stenocereus eruca*. Photo: Hans Frohning

Photo 4: *Stenocereus eruca* in habitat (Baja California, Mexico). Photo: Hardy Hübener

Photo 5: Shoot tip of *Stenocereus eruca* with red spines in the new shoot. Photo: Hardy Hübener