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Setiechinopsis mirabilis :

The flower of Prayer

Roberto Kiesling (Argentina)

One of the most difficult species to find when looking for cactus in Argentina is *Setiechinopsis mirabilis*. It grows in brackish lands under low shrubs, that is to say, in places that mainly we did not suspect that there could be cactus. On the other hand, many times when looking for the species where we found it in previous years it had simply disappeared, although years after it is possible to go back and find it in numbers.



The genus *Setiechinopsis*, created by de Haas in 1940 in *Succulenta* magazine of Holland, includes a single species *S. mirabilis*, which had been known since 1905 when Spegazzini described it as *Echinopsis mirabilis*.

It is a small plant, with a single stem, in general of about 10 cm high, although it can reach up to 20 cm, with a diameter of 3-5 cm in its average part, thinner in the



Setiechinopsis (Arthroceus) mirabilis (photo & collection : J. L.).

base and the superior part. The colour of the epidermis is mainly mulberry or dark brown, without a doubt from the great amount of pigments that defend it from the intense sun. The stem continues underground in a thick but short, napiform main root, of which thin secondary roots are born.

It blooms easily and its flowers -night blooming- are showy for the thinness of the tube, of 7-15 cm long, whereas the pure white perianth opens until it forms a perfect disc. The most probable scenario is that this corresponds to the pollination of it by nocturnal butterflies with long proboscis, as with *Phyllocactus phyllanthus*. The outer part of the flower - the floral receptacle- has very narrow and extended scales, with hairs in the axils.

In cultivation all the flowers develop fruits and seeds, which indicate self-fertilization, at least when they lack the pollinators. The flowers are very sensitive to the light; even when one illuminates them to photograph them, they close quickly.

The only species of this genus is endemic to the lowlands and somewhat brackish lands situated in the middle of Argentina, mostly hidden under shrubs of several species of *Atriplex*, in the provinces of Santiago del Estero, Santa Fe, the Rioja, San Juan, San Luis and middle-south of Mendoza. The species was discovered in Ceres, a locality in the region between Santiago del Estero and Santa Fe (now in Santa Fe), where I was not able to have a look for it, but surely it grows in an ample saline zone to the NW of that city.

I believe these are plants of fast growth and relatively short life, possibly affected by the great changes in the saline concentration, changes that occur when rains dilute it; or on the contrary drought gradually increases the concentration of salts throughout the dry season, when by capillary action the ground water ascends and evaporates, depositing the salts at the surface. Also the germination seems to be fast and always there is a percentage to be found that bloom and fruit. The fast growth explains that on some occasions we find it in abundance. Its ephemeral life, possibly shortened by the excess of salts in some seasons, would explain why sometimes it appears to be absent.

The common name mentioned by Spegazzini is "Flor of the Oracion, or Flower of Prayer". In order to explain this name it is necessary to know that the "Prayer" means the hour in which the sun sets, the hour for prayer before eating and sleeping, "the flower that opens at the sunset".

The affinity of this plant is very possibly with species of *Echinopsis*, many of which also have exclusively nocturnal flowers and have a thin tube, although not to the same extent as with *S. mirabilis*. It was also included in the genus *Arthrocereus*, also with narrow flowers and similar stems, but it may only be a convergence of form.

In cultivation, it grows without great difficulty, each plant producing several flowers in a year, and because of its form, size and colour, it is an embellishment to any collection.

Text : R. Kiesling, Photos, J.L