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***Echinocereus pensilis* updated** by Colin C. Walker



Ed Mroczek's photo from his article in Journal Volume 70, No 2 (June 2017)

In the June issue of this journal Ed Mroczek discussed some "Oddities in the glasshouse". One of these was *Echinocereus pensilis* and this current note updates what Ed wrote about this unique cactus.

This species was described in 1904 as *Cereus pensilis*, a classification justified because it is *Cereus*-like, albeit with pendulous rather than erect stems. It became *Echinocereus pensilis* in 1908, but as Ed said, "this is a very unusual plant which does not look at all like a typical bushy *Echinocereus*". As I'll explain, this is not surprising since this is NOT an *Echinocereus* at all!

It remained in *Echinocereus* until 1974 when Gordon Rowley reassessed its status in an article entitled "The unhappy medium: *Morangaya* – a new genus of Cactaceae". Gordon proposed that this species sat uncomfortably in *Echinocereus* and described the new genus *Morangaya* to accommodate it, named after three cactus explorers: Reid Moran, Ed and Betty Gay.

In 1985 Nigel Taylor, in his book "The genus *Echinocereus*", returned it to *Echinocereus* in its own section *Morangaya*. Nigel did however acknowledge its uniqueness and said that "Its stems and habit are certainly

quite unusual for an *Echinocereus* and at first suggest a closer relationship with *Aporocactus* Lemaire, where its slender red flowers would not be out of place”.

Most recently in 2011 molecular studies involving DNA sequencing have shown that this species is not closely related to *Echinocereus*, so Gordon has been vindicated and the current appropriate name for this species is therefore *Morangaya pensilis*. This species is endemic to Baja California South where it is very localised, being found only in the mountains of the Cape region. In habitat it hangs down rocky granitic cliffs in a serpent-like fashion with stems growing up to 4 m long but the flowers are relatively small being no more than 6.5 cm long.

My plant of *M. pensilis* grew moderately fast and was finally housed in a large hanging basket but produced only a few stems, the longest of which was about 1 m long but only 4 cm across. Despite being provided with a lot of t.l.c. it never flowered and was eventually consigned to the compost heap out of boredom and a need for the space to grow something more interesting and floriferous! I have to congratulate Ed for producing a single flower, but as he indicated, the reason for the exceptionally poor flowering characteristics of this species is currently unknown. Graham Charles, the well-known cactus expert, has a saying for plants such as this that really aren't worth giving valuable greenhouse space too: "best left in habitat". It is, though, unique but it certainly is NOT an *Echinocereus*.

c.walker702@btinternet.com