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# A couple of cotyledons

by Colin C. Walker

## Introduction

*Cotyledon* is a small but diverse genus of Crassulaceae. It currently includes 16 species of perennial shrubs with paired, opposite, stiff persistent leaves and relatively large tubular, pendulous orange-red flowers. It is extremely diverse, particularly in terms of stem and leaf form and arrangement. Its closest relatives are *Tylecodon* (winter growers) with spirally-arranged, soft, deciduous leaves and *Adromischus* which have small, usually erect, non-red flowers, although *Adromischus phillipsiae* is atypical with pendulous red flowers. In terms of distribution *Cotyledon* is principally a widespread African genus that just enters south-western Arabia.

*Cotyledon* (together with *Tylecodon*) is well served in the literature by a modern well-illustrated



Fig. 1 *Cotyledon pendens* in a 13 cm diameter hanging pot.

monograph (Van Jaarsveld & Koutnik, 2004), although five new localised species have been discovered and named since this book was published.

Here, just a couple of cotyledons are showcased: *Cotyledon pendens* and *C. tomentosa* exhibiting rather different growth habits.

## *Cotyledon pendens*

This is an obligate cliff-dwelling species, named for its pendulous habit. In my collection it is a rapidly-growing plant ideally

suites for display in a hanging pot or basket where it makes a very attractive plant (Fig. 1). Its long pendent stems, unique in the genus, are woody but brittle and well branched up to 60 cm in length. The leaves are densely arranged in alternating pairs, prominently pointed at the tip and tapering at the base, flattened

on both surfaces, whitish grey-green with a powdery glaucous covering with pink-tinged edges when grown in full sun. My plant flowered for the first time in June to August 2021 (Fig. 2) after four years in cultivation. It has so far produced a single pendent flower at the tip of each branch,



Fig. 2. Close up of flower of *C. pendens*.

inflorescences with up to 4 flowers. Each flower has a 2 cm long tube, pale apricot pink in colour with strongly recurved orange-red petal lobes 2 cm long.

*Cotyledon pendens* is a highly localised species known only from its type locality where it grows only on sheer south-facing cliffs near to Tsolorha along the Mbashe River in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Its closest relatives appear to be *C. adscendens* and *C. woodii*, both of which differ in being erect shrublets.



Fig. 3. *Cotyledon tomentosa* subsp. *tomentosa* in a 25 cm diameter pan.

### ***Cotyledon tomentosa***

This species was named as long ago as 1862 and has since become a popular plant in cultivation. It is named *tomentosa* for the tomentose or shortly hairy leaves (Fig. 3). Plants are variable with erect to sprawling woody stems up to 50 cm tall which are moderately well branched. Leaves too are variable and in the typical subsp. *tomentosa* these are flattened on the upper surface and convex on the lower with up to 8 marginal teeth with lobes that can be reddish in full sun, giving the overall shape

of a closed hand. In contrast subsp. *ladismithiensis* has oblong-elliptical leaves up to 8 cm long and 3 cm wide. In my experience *C. tomentosa* is a relatively slow growing, shy bloomer producing short inflorescences up to 15 cm tall bearing erect to pendulous tubular pale yellow to orange-red flowers (Fig. 4). For me in the UK it flowers in December to January.

*Cotyledon tomentosa* has a narrow distribution in the Western and Eastern Cape Provinces of South Africa.

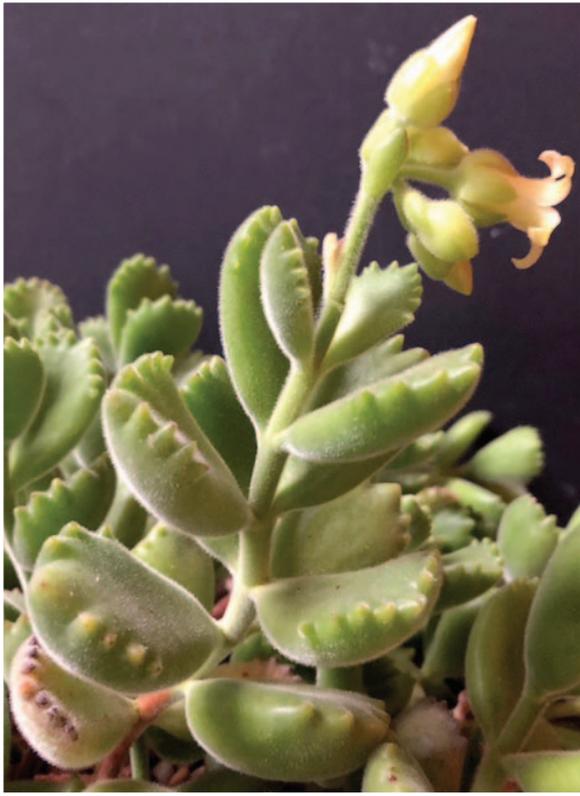


Fig. 4. *Cotyledon tomentosa* subsp. *tomentosa* in flower.

Two cultivars of *C. tomentosa* have been named based on the palm-shaped leaves and colour of the variegation: 'White Palm' (Fig. 5) and 'Yellow Palm'. I have grown both of these for several years and they have yet to flower for me.

### Cultivation

Cotyledons are generally easy to grow and are very rewarding in terms of their attractiveness. Some plants such as *C. pendens* are fast growers whilst in contrast *C. tomentosa* is relatively slow-growing. They all come

readily from stem cuttings and for the thicker-leaved plants I suspect that leaf cuttings would also be successful, although I have yet to attempt this method of propagation.

Notwithstanding *C. tomentosa*, most of the plants I have so far flowered do so in spring through into the summer here in the UK and the flowers are generally relatively large, colourful, ranging from pale yellow through apricot, orange to deep red; all are long-lasting

with individual flowers lasting around a week or more, so a single plant with many flowers can be in bloom for several weeks. Hence these plants are very rewarding,

On the downside, many plants either have weak and floppy or thin and pendulous stems, so these are far from ideal for the show bench. Even large shrubs can have weak stems when carrying tall inflorescences and need support to prevent damaging them. Another problem with

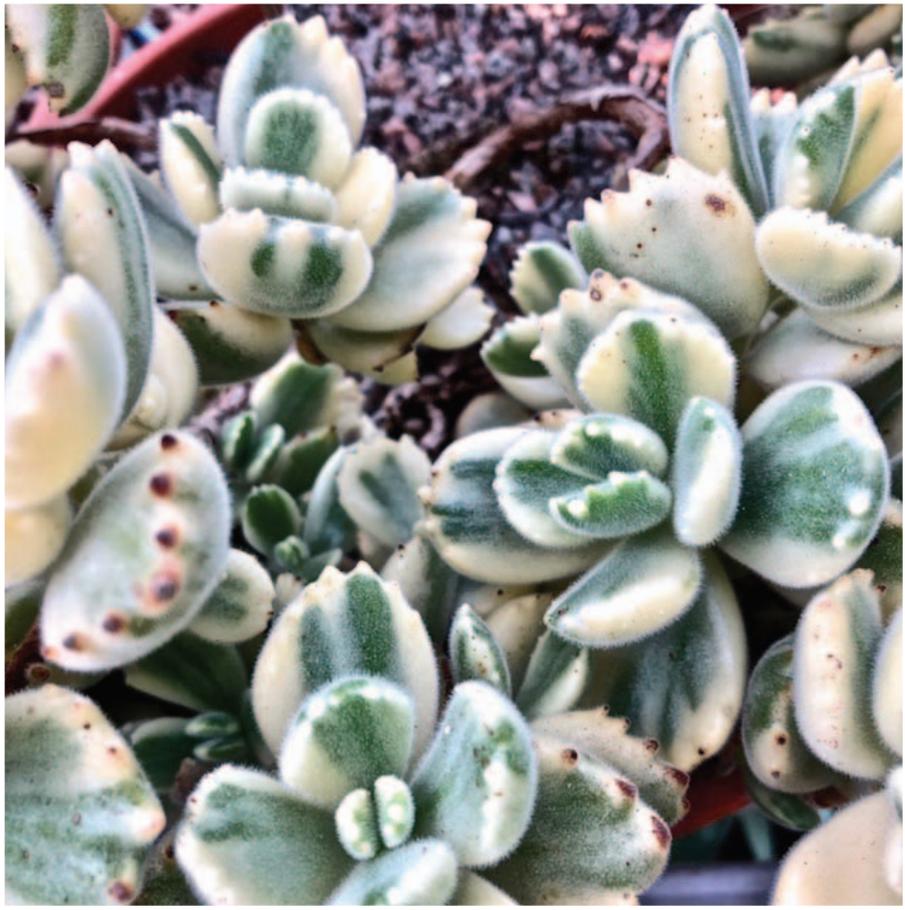


Fig. 5. *Cotyledon tomentosa* 'White Palm'.

many plants is that the powdery glaucous grey-white covering is easily damaged, again reducing their show-worthiness. On that front, plants such as those of the non-glaucous *C. tomentosa* are more amenable for transportation.

### Reference

Van Jaarsveld, E. & Koutnik, D. (2004) *Cotyledon and Tylecodon*.  
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