



Hair-Covered Cactus resembles a clump of bloomin' animal fur.

FLORA FACTS

Scientific Name: *Mammillaria multiceps*

Common Names: Hair-Covered Cactus, Grape Cactus

Family: Cactaceae (Cactus)

Peanut-Sized Bloomer Forms Colonies

I stumbled upon a colony of Hair-Covered Cactus at Ramsey Park, nicely-protected overhead by a large mesquite. This small cactus is sensitive to cold and also to excessive amounts of full sun.

“Left in a dry pot in full sun, it shrinks up to almost nothing,” Mike Heep tells me. Indeed, when Ramsey Park

has been without rain or irrigation for a long time, the Hair-Covered Cactus is hard to locate.

It's likely that this colony-forming cactus is accidentally uprooted by many of us. In the dry season, it looks like a chunk of dried-up animal fur. Many of us would kick it to see if recognizable bones or teeth were still attached. It is fragile and easily dislodged. Without available water, it's almost impossible to successfully replant in drought-hardened clay.

Mammillaria multiceps is one of several botanical names for the small, hairy cactus. Those who name cacti rarely agree about how they should be classified. Many botanical names given to local species were conferred by German botanists, examining dry, mounted specimens shipped across the ocean to their homeland in the 1800's. Mike Heep tells me that cacti are still an exciting group for botanists to write research papers about. Thus they are named and renamed *ad nauseum*.

The most currently-accepted name for Hair-Covered Cactus is *Mammillaria prolifera* variety *texana*. I favor the older name preferred by my favorite cactus expert, Del Weniger.

Each name has merit in terms of describing either the cactus or how it grows. *Mammillaria* are covered with protuberances called tubercles. These apparently remind people of tiny tits, thus the reference to hairy mammals with milk-producing glands. This particular species of *Mammillaria* is covered with such dense and bristly spines that the presence of tits is almost left to imagination. You can see them if you look carefully.

The spines are of several types. Outer spines on each tubercle are very fine and entirely flexible. Inner series become progressively shorter and heavier. The innermost are rigid and spread protectively in all directions.

What one notices about this cactus besides the hair-like covering is that each individual is very small, not much wider or taller than an inch. Rarely, one encounters a solitary individual. In early March, a peanut-sized individual and several colonies were in bloom at Ramsey Park. Most

often, a whole colony of the small cacti grow clumped together. Sometimes they appear almost flat with the ground. The species name *prolifera* may refer to this tendency to proliferate.

Mike Heep located a website dedicated to translating between Latin and English:

<http://www.nd.edu/~archives/latin.htm>. It's pretty handy for understanding botanical names.

Multiceps translates to multi-part or multi-headed, which describes a colony of *Mammillaria multiceps* quite well.

Hair-Covered Cactus in bloom is hardly resplendent, though it sure is cute. Bloom colors are subtle. This endearing plant apparently survives by blending in, rather than by flamboyant advertisement. Blooms are tiny and pale yellow or cream-colored. Their throat is a pale reddish-pink, as are tiny lines dissecting each petal. The central male and female flower parts are yellowish in color.

Even the red fruit of the small cactus is hardly noticeable from a distance.

There are two almost indistinguishable colony-forming, hair-covered cacti found in the LRGV. Dr. Alfred Richardson has constructed a helpful key for distinguishing them in *Plants of the Rio Grande Delta* (1995).



Richardson tells us to look for them in thickets, among grasses and crevices, usually in partial shade.

My favorite reference book for in-depth cactus information and photographs is out-of-print: Del Weniger's *Cacti of Texas and Neighboring States*, 1984. It is often shelved in the "Texas" section of local libraries, with other books about native plants of the area.

The presence of several native cactus species at Hugh Ramsey Park is a real treasure for Harlingen. Careful work of volunteers has helped to preserve them for future generations of humans, as well as for wildlife.

Technical assistance by Mike Heep, native plant nurseryman and UTPA Instructor. Mrs. Mild holds an M.S. in Biol. Sci. She may be contacted at RioDeltaWild@aol.com.

Return to website: www.riodeltawild.com

An additional photo of an entire colony of the cactus appears on the following page.



This colony grows beneath a mesquite tree at Harlingen's Ramsey Park.