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Horticulturally Yours
Fortnightly Plant Column from DANIEL SPARLER

DYCKIAS: SHARP-TONGUED SWEETIES

*Is love a tender thing? It is too rough,
Too rude, too boist'rous; and it pricks like thorn.¹
—William Shakespeare*

Dear NHS Members and Friends,



Spring has sprung, or so claims the calendar, and sap is rising. Bushes abound with amorous birds, bees are abuzz, and lusty gardeners are feeling frisky, eager to get down in the dirt at the dawn of a new growing season. But as passionate planters are well aware, springtime endeavors in the garden bring peril and a smattering of pain along with the promise of pleasure. Thorns, spines, and prickles are part and parcel of the process as we prune the roses, trim the barberries, and clean the cactus. Over the last week, I resolved to rectify years of deferred maintenance on one of my pet projects, a collection of dyckias,² the genus of compact and handsome but heavily barbed South American bromeliads. In the wake of this painful process, my hands, if they could sing, would be wailing lines from Boudleaux Bryant³: “Love hurts, love scars. Love wounds and mars.”

My romance with dyckias blossomed rather late. Although I acquired my first, solitary specimen (the long-lived cultivar ‘Brittle Star’) in 2004, only in the last dozen years has the relationship reached full fruition. At present my collection encompasses 11 highly distinctive cultivars, each with its own set of charms. Common characteristics include perfectly geometrical whorls of stiff, glossy, elongated triangular leaves in tones of green, bronze, tan, maroon, or silver, with occasional, long-lasting flower stalks in summer of yellow or orange flowers much prized by pollinators. A fetching feature of the deep-tinted varieties is their habit of fading to green in the low light of winter only to darken up again come summer.

Unlike most bromeliads, dyckias⁴ —amazingly cold-hardy for tropical plants— are not epiphytic, but terrestrial or saxicolous, that is, either growing in the ground or anchored among rocks. As such, they develop extensive roots systems and grow rapidly if provided ample space. They prefer living in a rockery or raised bed, but this is impractical in our climate given their need to be kept dry in winter. I do grow one cultivar in the ground, a diminutive and dashing hybrid (*D. marnier-lapostollei* × *fosteriana*), but under the wide eaves of my south-facing xeriscape bed that shield residents from all but wind-blown precipitation. That said, most varieties tolerate the limitations of life in containers, even in narrow ones if they have sufficient depth, provided that the potting medium is replaced every few years.

In addition to the little cutie cited above, here are a quartet of other appealing cultivars that may win your heart, as they did mine: ‘Black Gold’—a vigorous, dark-foliaged charmer with sharp spines. This 10-year-old cluster is the one that lacerated me as I attempted to clean it a few days

ago. 'Naked Lady'—an unfortunately named but docile (no spines!) lustrous, green-leaved beauty that readily produces easy-to-remove pups. 'Grape Jelly'—the one dearest to my heart at the moment, although I've only grown it two years. Succulent, robust leaves with apparently menacing but actually benign barbs shift from glaucous green in winter to deepest purple in late summer. Finally, the queen of my dreams, *D. floribunda* 'La Rioja', an Argentine native that has rocked my world for 11 years with its self-sufficient nature and gleaming, powdery foliage. No wonder it has acquired the common name "silver starfish".

Should you choose to initiate a relationship with dyckias, please note that they need full sun and ample water in summer. You can pamper them in the warm season with a dose of diluted (quarter strength) fertilizer. Frost resistant, many dyckias can withstand temperatures down to 20 degrees Fahrenheit if kept dry, but they will happily live indoors in cold weather if you have a bright window for them and remember to withhold the water.

On that note, it's time to don my gloves, gird up my loins, and head outside to divide and reset the pot-bound 'Black Gold' that bloodied my hands when I rubbed it the wrong way a couple of days ago. If all goes as planned, I'll file my next missive in mid-April from Granada and Sevilla and attempt to reflect on (with apologies to Manuel de Falla) "Nights in the Gardens of Spain".

Horticulturally yours,
Daniel

¹ Romeo to Mercutio in Act I, Scene 4 of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

² The genus *Dyckia*, lamentably, is named for a Prussian (German) botanist, Josef zu Salm-Reifferscheidt-Dyck (1773-1861), rather than employing an indigenous term, as does the closely related genus, *Puya*, which derives from the Chilean Mapudungún word for "point".

³ Bryant's 1960 song "Love Hurts" was recorded by the Everly Brothers, Roy Orbison, Emmylou Harris and Gram Parsons, Cher, Rod Stewart, Joan Jett, Heart, and perhaps most notably, the Scottish rock band Nazareth.

⁴ Plants of the World Online, the authoritative database maintained by Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, lists 177 accepted species in the genus *Dyckia*, endemic mainly to Brazil and Argentina, with a few hailing from Bolivia, Paraguay and Uruguay.



Dyckia 'Grape Jelly' (summer), *Dyckia* 'Grape Jelly' (winter), *Dyckia* 'Naked Lady' with pups