

MAMMILLARIA VETULA SSP GRACILIS

By Sue Haffner



Photograph from Welcome to Cactusland

This little cactus has long been known in the hobby as *Mammillaria fragilis*, an apt name given its propensity to come apart at the slightest disturbance. John Pilbeam in his book "*Mammillaria*" proposes that this may be the most widespread *Mammillaria* species in cultivation, "featuring commonly at almost any event where plant sales occur, except paradoxically at cactus-oriented events, where it would be ignominious to offer it."

I suppose his tongue-in-cheek comment is a reference to the poor thing's common use. You see it in garden shops in tiny pots by itself or as a component of cactus dish gardens. Its stems are slender, cylindrical, to 13cm long, 1 to 3 cm wide, with 11 to 16 chalky white radial spines, 3 to 8 mm long. Central spines either absent or, if present, up to 10 to 12 mm long. Flowers are small about

12 mm long and wide, pale yellow with pinkish or brownish mid-stripe.

It was originally described from plants collected in the Mexican state of Hidalgo, under shrubs in leaf mold on limestone rocks at 1,600 meters altitude. It is also found in the neighboring state of Queretaro.

Another factor contributing to *M. vetula* ssp. *gracilis*' common status is its ease of culture. It seems to survive all manner of neglect—heat, cold, wet, drought. Yes, it's not very showy, but its compact shape with white chalky spines makes it agreeable and not too aggressive. Propagation is ridiculously easy. Elton Roberts writes: "You have to have a steady hand when repotting the plant or you will knock heads off and have a very non-symmetrical plant ... I keep the plants dry over the winter. They are in my regular soil mix. They want an acidic soil."

There are some variants of ssp. *gracilis*, for example, var. *pulchella*, a smaller and even more slender variety. European hybridizers have developed other forms, as well.

This is truly a plant to be recommended for beginners.