

## March Cactus of the Month

Joseph Rodd

### *Cereus* cv. “Ming Thing”



**Taxonomy:** Typically sold as “*Cereus forbesii*,” *Ming Thing* is a naturally-occurring monstrose cultivar whose true species name is disputed. The taxonomy here is muddled: there are three names, *C. validus*, *C. hankeanus*, and *C. forbesii*, that probably refer to the same species. Different scholars prefer different names, and official sources disagree about whether *forbesii* or *hankeanus* is the currently-accepted taxon.

**Habitat:** “*Ming Thing*” is an ornamental cultivar, so its natural habitat is collections and nurseries! *Cereus forbesii/hankeanus* is native to Argentina, Peru, and Paraguay, where it grows in the rain shadow along the eastern side of the Andes where so many wonderful cacti can be found. In habitat it’s an extremely large, columnar species. Interestingly, in Paraguay the fruit of *cereus forbesii* is harvested and called “tuna,” (the same name as *Opuntia* fruit), and – very confusingly – some authors even refer to it as a “prickly pear.”

**Description:** “*Ming Thing*” displays a monstrose mutation that causes it to develop club-shaped growths and take on an abstract, sculptural form. Small areoles covered in

white trichomes and short black spines dot the tops and sides of these strange protrusions. Fresh growth is particularly glaucous, which is probably what I like most about this cultivar. Nurseries say it grows up to a foot tall, but I suspect they can get larger with time. *Ming Thing* rarely flowers, but when it does, the flowers themselves can be bizarrely-shaped mutants. I am really hoping that mine will do this soon!

**Cultivation:** This cactus is extremely easy to grow and will tolerate a large variety of soil, moisture, nutrient, and light levels. *Cereus* often like more nutrients and moisture than many other cacti, so I plan to use a slightly-richer mix when I next repot it. Compared to many of my other plants, pests and fungi seem to leave it mostly alone. The only issue I’ve had is that caterpillars and slugs will munch on it if they get the chance.

*Ming Thing* can tolerate almost full shade – I’m sure it could be grown successfully indoors in a bright spot – but can also handle direct sun, especially if it isn’t a summer afternoon. In my experience, it seems like adjusting the amount of light it receives gives you some control over its shape: if you want it to stay more compact and form tighter clusters with lots of wrinkles, grow it in more shade. If you want it to get taller more quickly, give it more sun.

The literature says it can’t handle a freeze, but a couple years ago mine survived 28° F (-2° C) without damage, so I’d suggest that they can tolerate a light freeze if bone-dry. Fertilize lightly in spring. Water regularly in the growing season and sparingly in winter. Not a fast grower but a steady one, *Ming Thing* is one cactus that’s pretty hard to mess up.



**Availability:** They're literally everywhere. *Ming Thing* is often propagated through cloning, and the big box suppliers like Altman are pumping these bad boys out. It's hard to walk into a home improvement center or nursery in the Houston area and not encounter one. Because plentiful specimens can be found for \$5 at any Home Depot and grown to maturity with ease, I would not recommend spending more than that on this plant. Apparently the mutation is inherited, because it's also possible to order seeds online – you know, if you prefer to go the fun route.

#### References:

Anceschi, Giovanna and Magli, Alberto. "*Cereus forbesii*." *Cactus in Habitat*. <http://www.cactusinhabitat.org/index.php?p=specie&id=196>

"Can Ming Thing Have Flowers?" *Cactiguide Forum*. <https://cactiguide.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=18428>

"*Cereus forbesii* monstrose 'Ming Thing'." *North Carolina State University Extension Plant Toolbox*. <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/cereus-forbesii-monstrose-ming-thing>

Hunt, D. R. Cites *Cactaceae* Checklist, 3rd ed. Kew: Royal Botanic Gardens. 2016. <https://www.kew.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/CITES%20Cactaceae%20Checklist%20Third%20Edition.pdf>

Integrated Taxonomic Information System, <https://www.itis.gov>

International Plant Names Index, <https://www.ipni.org/>

Llifle Encyclopedia of Cacti, <http://llifle.com/Encyclopedia/CACTI>

López, J. et al., "Chaco Prickly Pear (*Cereus forbesii* Otto ex C.F. Först): An Ancient Source of Antioxidants and Dietary Fiber in the Diet of Indigenous Populations and Its Potential Application as an Ingredient in Derived Products," *Biology and Life Sciences Forum* 2022, 17, 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/blsf2022017021>