

Medusa's Head Euphorbia, *Euphorbia caput-medusae*



The genus *Euphorbia* is a very large and diverse group that includes a number of succulent species. Many succulent collectors are interested in the so-called medusoid euphorbias – plants with snake-like cylindrical arms coming from a central head, a reference to Medusa, the Greek mythological creature with snakes coming from her head instead of hair.

The species *Euphorbia caput-medusae* is one example of these fascinating plants that makes a great conversation piece. Found in sandy soils and rocky outcrops along the coast near Cape Town, South Africa, this unusual plant has been grown as a curiosity for a long time; it was brought to the Botanic Garden in Amsterdam

Euphorbia caput-medusae.

in about 1700. Although it is locally common in some parts of its native range, more than half its habitat has been destroyed by urban development and invasive alien plants, and the remaining populations are threatened by the steenbok (small antelope) that like to eat them. Also, with fewer large herbivores left to browse the large bushes their habitat is getting shadier, making it difficult for the plants to survive.



Medusa's head euphorbia in habitat near Cape Point in Table Mountain National Park (L, in lower right of photo) and from above (R).



Euphorbia caput-medusae growing among other vegetation.

The twisting, serpent-like stems of *E. caput-medusae* grow horizontally from a short, central caudex (swollen basal stem). The numerous, crowded branches are sometime partially buried in the ground. As it typically does not get much more than a foot across (some specimens can get to 3 feet across under ideal conditions), it is possible to grow this species as a container plant.



The twisting stems grow from a central caudex.

The plant's stems do not have true spines, but the sharp, persistent remains of the peduncles (inflorescence stalks) make the plants rather prickly. The grey-green stems are covered with layered tubercles that resemble snake scales and are leafless except for a tiny ring of true leaves at the knobbed tips. Like all euphorbias, the sap in the stems is irritating to skin and eyes, so plants should be handled with care.



The succulent stems are covered with protruberances (L), with the small leaves only at the ends of the stems (R).

The flowers on the Medusa's head euphorbia are typical of all euphorbias.

All of these plants produce an unusual flower structure called a cyathium. This cup-like structure, surrounded by a ring of five showy glands, houses the actual reproductive parts (a single pistillate flower and numerous staminate flowers each with a single stamen, all on their own pedicels). The glands of *E. caput-medusae* have distinctive white, fringe-like appendages. The solitary cyathia are produced in terminal clusters at the ends of branches. The flowers that bloom in early spring are also lightly fragrant. The intricate inflorescences are not particularly spectacular from a distance, but are quite interesting and beautiful up close.



A plant in full flower (L), a closeup of the inflorescences at the end of one stem (C), and a single cyathium (R).



The glands of the cyathia change color as the seed capsules start to mature (L), drying up eventually leaving the green capsules at the ends of the stems (C) and (R).

from white to pink or red as the seeds develop, eventually shrivelling to nothing.

And like other euphorbias, this species produces rounded, three-chambered seed capsules. The showy glands around the cyathia change



There are many medusoid euphorbias (including hybrids) available to succulent collectors.

winter it will need to be gradually acclimated to brighter light when it is moved outdoors again after the last frost. It is best started from seed as cuttings tend to produce upright growth instead of a caudex with sprawling branches.

This species is cultivated like a typical succulent. Although it is a winter grower in habitat (because that is when the annual rains occur) it will grow in summer in other locations. It needs a fast-draining growing medium and the soil should be allowed to dry out between waterings. It can be grown outdoors in the summer in the Midwest, but as it is a tender perennial hardy only to zone 9, it should be brought indoors before the first frost. It can be kept over the winter in a very sunny window or greenhouse, with restricted watering to prevent rotting. This species is very difficult to maintain over the winter if sufficient light is not available. After the



A young *Euphorbia caput-medusae* growing in white sand.



***Tillandsia caput-medusae*.**

The common name medusa's head is also applied to other euphorbias (such as *E. flanagani*, which has much thinner stems) and several other plants, including an invasive grass, *Taeniatherum caput-medusae*, native to the Mediterranean, and a commonly cultivated, grey-green bromeliad from Central America and Mexico (*Tillandsia caput-medusae*) with twisted leaves.

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