

La Visnaga - Barrel Cactus,

This native grown cactus can not only dominate your garden it can also satisfy your sweet tooth.

Visnaga is the generic term used in Mexico to refer to any barrel-type cactus. The plant belongs to the genus Echinocactus and from this genus there are numerous species.

Versions of this cactus have been portrayed in old westerns and cartoons. A desperate character is dragging himself across the desert, dying of thirst. He happens upon a barrel cactus and somehow slashes off the top. Then grasping in both hands tilts the cactus to his lips, drinks the life-saving liquid and lives to play another episode. The reality is this cactus does yield a life-sustainable bitter liquid but the long spines, some with hooks, would be a little inconvenient to hold onto.

Like many cacti, the visnaga can be dramatic. In the wild when going through a long drought, they take on a brown hue almost like they are dead or dying. In fact they're not. They can go a year or two without water and some larger species even longer. The same cacti grown in gardens keep their green color with weekly watering. They can grow solo or in clusters. Their size varies from a few inches to as tall as three feet. One hundred year old visnagas dot the landscape of our Baja Peninsula.

You will find the traditional candy made from this plant on display at food stores, like the one in this photo taken at the Ley Supermarket. The white bars are called dulce de visnaga or acitrón. The pith of the plant is cut into large cubes and boiled with sugar creating a rich sweet taste.

A sought after barrel cactus species for landscaping is the visnaga de oro or golden barrel cactus, native to interior Mexico. It is said, an ounce of golden barrel seeds is more valuable than an ounce of gold.

You can eat, drink or use this versatile cacti for decoration. My preference is to enjoy a desert hike and see them growing right here in our expansive Los Cabos backyard.