

## **Stapelia flavopurpurea: A sweet starfish flower**

By Mark Dimmitt

From August 2011 Central Spine



A large specimen of *Stapelia flavopurpurea* in full flower during late summer. The medium in this rock pot by Steve Holmes is only one to two inches deep, which helps prevent overwatering.

Most succulent collectors have grown at least a few stapeliads, a tribe of the former milkweed family *Asclepiadaceae* (The family was recently combined into the dogbane family, *Apocynaceae*). All stapeliads are succulents, and they bear a wide range of flower sizes and shapes. Most species share the trait of being pollinated by flies and carrion beetles. Therefore the flowers look and smell like dead things. (Mark wrote another article about these in a later *Desert Breeze*.)

The featured species is one of the few exceptions; it isn't a "carrion flower". The flowers don't look like rotting meat, and they have a powerful and delightful sweet fragrance. They're still fly pollinated, but they offer nectar (energy food) instead of the false promise of a place to lay eggs.

However, the flowers appear to produce no nectar; they're still apparently relying on deceit to get pollinated. The flowers are born in late summer; healthy plants produce many one-inch star-shaped flowers with a plethora of frills, spikes, and warts.

The color ranges from brown to bright yellow green, often with purple centers. The penetrating fragrance is reminiscent of honey or some cookies or candy being baked in grandma's kitchen.

#### Culture

This species is easy to grow. It does best in filtered sunlight in any well-drained potting medium. Protect it from frost in the winter. Like most stapeliads, plants become senescent after several years, so they should be restarted from cuttings when growth and flowering slow. The best time is in late summer when they're growing most actively. The one problem I've encountered is that if the stem is even partially buried, the plant will usually rot. Cuttings should simply be laid on the surface of the potting medium. Healthy young plants grow rampantly. An easy way to propagate them is to place empty pots filled with medium adjacent to a plant when it begins to run over the edge of its pot. Masses of stems may hang a foot or more over the edge of a pot for a time, but the joints are loosely attached and easily broken.

Mark Dimmitt, Ph.D. has been the Director of Natural History at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum since 1997. Mark earned his Ph.D. in biology from the University of California at Riverside and is an avid plant hybridizer.



A brown-flowered form of *Stapelia flavopurpurea* Photo by Mark Dimmitt



A flower of *Stapelia flavopurplea*. While you're getting close to enjoy the fragrance, the flower offers a visual treat too. Spikes, fur, and wrinkles; a punk flower? Photo by Mark Dimmitt