

Fascicularia bicolor

If you are looking for something unusual for October and you like succulents then this plant could be what you are looking for. Helen Dillon rather rudely calls it the 'Monkey's Bottom Plant'. It is a bromeliad, the same family as the pineapple, and it comes from Chile. In fact it is the only hardy bromeliad. It used to be thought to be only marginally hardy but as long as it is grown in gritty soil it will survive the coldest winter. After all in its native habitat it grows high in the Andes. It was introduced into Europe in 1851 and was originally called *Rhodostachys*. It has very long fleshy toothed leaves; the inner ones gradually become bright red in autumn just as the rosette of blue flowers opens up. As they mature the flowers become a deeper metallic blue and when fully open they reveal yellow stamens. The flower head looks.....well, like a monkey's or rather a baboon's bottom I suppose. It is certainly eye catching. The word 'fascicularia' in Latin means 'clustered together in bundles', and indeed the plant eventually makes a large mound of rosettes.

There is a lot of confusion over the names of *Fascicularia pitcairniifolia* and *Fascicularia bicolor*. *Fascicularia pitcairniifolia* has now been renamed *Fascicularia bicolor* subsp. *canaliculata*. And *Fascicularia bicolor* is now *Fascicularia bicolor* subsp. *bicolor*. I hope you are still with me. Not only are the names confusing but it is difficult telling one plant from the other unless you have the two side by side. *F. bicolor* has leaves which are thicker and more succulent and the pale blue tubular flowers develop fully starting from the outside with the inner flowers opening last. It is hardier than *F. bicolor* ssp. *canaliculata*. In Chile the plant is saxicolous, which means it grows on rocky ground. It grows largely on the coast. *F. pitcairniifolia* or *F. bicolor* subsp. *canaliculata* as we must learn to call it has longer, toothed leaves and deep blue flowers which open from the centre outwards. In Chile it grows in the temperate forests, it is largely epiphytic which means it grows on trees. In Europe of course it can be grown in the ground. Both these two *Fascicularia* subspecies need stony ground with plenty of grit which does not get wet. They will slowly grow into large mounds of rosettes. They can also be grown in a large pot and would be quite happy if allowed to get pot bound. They look good grouped with other succulents. Christopher Lloyd grew it on the edge of his roof on the North side of his house. He started it in a jiffy pot first. Of course to do this you need to make sure you have the epiphytic form, *F. bicolor* ssp. *Canaliculata*. I grow it in the ground where of course it is hardier. It looks good with the strappy leaves of *Puya* or *Kniphofia caulescens*. It is not a good idea to grow it under a tree, mine is under a greengage tree and the fallen leaves get trapped in it and look unsightly; removing them is a painful job.

There is a pink flowered form of *Fascicularia* which has now been named *Ochagavia litoralis*. It grows on rocky coastal cliffs in Chile and pictures of it look absolutely gorgeous. I don't know whether it is available in England but is certainly on my 'want list.'

To propagate *Fascicularia* you can pull off offsets or divide the clumps. The trouble is the hooked teeth of the leaves are designed to stop llamas grazing on them and they are vicious. After dividing it once and having the scars for weeks I have decided to leave my plant in peace. It is growing into a lovely big clump.



Fascicularia bicolor ssp. bicolor

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