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Climbing Plant Specialists

HOYA FACT SHEET

❖ Description of a Hoya

Hoya is a genus of tropical plants in the Asclepiad family. Most people when they think of Hoyas they automatically think of *Hoya carnosa*, more commonly known as "Grandma's Old Fashioned Wax Plant", and let it rest at that. When new growers of Hoyas curiosity is aroused to the point where he or she orders a catalogue, with the view that it's a bit silly to put out a catalogue advertising one plant, shock is often the result when the realisation hits that there are round 200 different species, plus numerous cultivars.

❖ Outline of the History of Hoya

Hoya was once a member of the Apocinaceae family of plants. Robert Brown created Asclepiadaceae in 1810 to accommodate a group of Apocinaceae plants whose characters did not fit well into that family. He named the new family Asclepiadaeaceae and included in it all those former Apocinaceae plants having their pollen contained in gelatinous masses called pollinia (singular is pollinium). The only other group of plants with pollinia are the Orchids. Hoyas contain the most beautiful flowers in the family. Robert Brown was born in Scotland and studied medicine in Edinburgh but did not take a medical degree, preferring instead to study the plants that, at that time, all medical specialists depended upon as cures. Despite his lifelong dedication to the study of plants, he is best known today in the scientific community for the discovery

of "Brownian Movement," which, simplified, is the motion that you see in a liquid containing minute suspended solid particles."

It is only by chance that Hoyas are known today by the name Hoya. There is still some controversy over which name, Hoya R. Brown or *Sperlingia* Vahl came first. Both names received their first publication in 1810 at about the same time. Some say that Brown's publication preceded Vahl's by several days and others argue the other way. The sides are so divided that there is a movement afoot to instigate formal efforts to have the name Hoya conserved since it is the most widely known name. If Vahl's had been published when it was first submitted there is no doubt that Hoyas would be known as *Sperlingias* today. *Sperlingia* lost out due to author's having been hanged for treason. His manuscript was not published until long after his death, it is said, because no publisher was willing to have his name associated with that of a traitor.

Robert Brown named Hoya in honour of his friend and fellow botanist Thomas Hoy, who was employed as head gardener by Duke of Northumberland at his estate, Sion House. There is no record of Thomas Hoy's ever having grown a Hoya but then he being a gardener he must have, seeing that his boss collected rare tropical plants.

❖ Hoyas - the way they are:

People always think of Hoyas as succulents because of the look and indeed many have succulent history, but the greater majority are non succulent plants. The usual thoughts are that Hoyas are climbing plants and once again there are climbers in their genus but there are also a lot of Hoyas that do not climb at all. Some Hoyas are epiphytes, some are woody shrubs and some are entirely terrestrial. There are still others that begin life as terrestrials then lose all contact with the ground and continue life as epiphytes. Many cling to their supports both by twining and by adventitious roots, but others grow as upright shrubs. There are a few that begin as upright shrubs but after becoming several feet tall, continue as twining vines. Some Hoyas are woody others are soft and succulent. Some have woody stalks and succulent leaves. Others are thin and wiry with papery leaves.

Hoya leaves vary in size, texture, colour and venation. In size they range from a centimeter in length and from two to four millimeters in width to 25cm. by 25cm *Hoya coriacea* Blume is said to sometimes have leaves as long as 60cm. One of the most succulent of the lot *Hoya kerrii*, Craib, has perfect valentine shaped leaves, with the notches at the apexes of the leaves instead of the bases. There are Hoyas with almost perfectly round leaves and one with linear leaves. A popular species *Hoya shephardii* has leaves that look for the world like bunches of string beans hanging

from stalks. *Hoya linearis* is covered with fine downy hair and greatly resembles masses of Spanish Moss (*Tillandsia*) hanging from trees in its native habitat. Some Hoyas leaves smooth and shiny while some are covered with hairs. Hoya leaves appear to be veinless while others have very conspicuous veins of a lighter or darker colour than the rest of the leaves. Some have leaves that are mottled with specks of silvery white; some Hoyas have leaves that are thin and translucent while some are so thick and succulent that they look more like crassulas than hoyas.

Hoya flowers are just as varied as the leaves, despite the fact that all are shaped like five pointed stars. They grow in umbrels, usually with many flowers per umbrel. Individual flowers range in size from as small as four to five millimeters in diameter to well over 7.5cm. in diameter. The number of flowers per umbrel varies from one to 55 or even more. *Hoya coriacea* Blume has been known to have as many as 70. each measuring nearly 2cm. in diameter. The single flowered *Hoya pauciflora* White makes up for its paucity by its flower size of nearly 40 millimeters in diameter.

Just as Hoyas vary in size, they also vary in texture, some being glabrous and shiny and some being quite hairy. They also vary in colour. They come in the purest white, varying shades of pink from almost white to bubble gum pink, yellowish pink, yellow, green, purple, reddish-brown and brown. There are some that are so dark that they are often referred to as black. Until recently it was thought that a true red Hoya was not ever likely to appear but recent discoveries make that possible. One of two clones of *Hoya mindorensis*, Schltr. From the Philippines, are currently in circulation, comes very close to being a true red. Blue still does not appear to be represented in the Hoya genus.

❖ The Culture of Hoyas

Hoyas are mostly easy to grow, they require well drained soil, warmth and humidity, and in the Northern Rivers area they seem to like dappled shade to full sun (depending on the species) with shelter in the winter from frosts and rain. Extra water in summer heat is best and almost dry in the winter. I have *Hoya carnosa* growing up a tree in a grove where it thrives without any attention at all. Hoyas are known to grow in some of the hottest parts of the world the secret to survival is very high humidity, and when it is cool only apply enough water to prevent leaf shrivel. Hoyas when in bloom can be taken in to a warm living room to enjoy he blooms as long as humidity is maintained, it is seldom that most Hoyas will not actually flower under these conditions so allow them to come into flower then take them inside.

Most Hoyas respond to small amounts of lime in the potting mix but most of them do better in very slightly acid compost. Some, being coastal dwellers can even take a bit of salt spray, so if you live near the ocean in a warm climate, you should have no trouble finding a Hoya suitable to your conditions. Some Hoyas like to grow symbiotically with ants. Eg. Ants build their nest beneath the leaves and contribute to the plants nourishment. One particular Hoya grows in the middle of ants the nest as it grows it climbs the tree the ants build "dirt dauber like" trails along the stalk to give their tunnels stability. The ants live inside the tunnels and supply nourishment to the plant. Collectors in the wild find to their sorrow that a Hoya without an ant in sight all of a sudden has ants everywhere and are quite severely stung attempting to take a cutting. The same Hoya grows quite well even without the presents of ants.

One of the worst aspects of growing Hoyas is find the correctly labeled plants. True collectors prefer to know that the plant that they have purchased is correctly labeled therefore they can supply the right growing conditions for the plant and know that it will flower the correct colour. One of these difficulties arises when a plant with the same name but different species name is sold to a customer- one plant comes from India and the other comes from the Solomon Islands - well you can see how this will effect the growing environment.

❖ Pests that affect Hoyas

Hoyas are affected by four main garden pests, aphids, mealy bugs, spider mites and scale insects. These are easily controlled by systemic insecticides, unless you are opposed to their use. Many control them with rubbing alcohol sprayed onto the plant in a diluted form (water) added to this is soap to make it "stick". Spray this mix onto the plant in the cool of the afternoon when the sun has lost its bite.

When using chemical sprays follow the instructions on the label explicitly even so-called harmless sprays have powerful effects on the human body.



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