



Pachypodium lamerei with Bran the Pyrenean Mountain Dog for scale

Rosedown Mill E-Book

An Introduction to Pachypodiums

The reaction of most people, when they see a Pachypodium for the first time ranges somewhere between the speechless and the hysterical. Often people come to our nursery looking for a palm or a cycad... and *then* they set eyes on the Pachypodiums. There's that brief moment when the eyes widen, the jaw drops and: "Wow! What is *that*?" they gasp.

Like them or loathe them, Pachypodiums most definitely are not plants that people pass by without noticing. With their bulbous stems or spiky trunks, their glossy leaves and startlingly beautiful flowers, they are amongst the most exotic, strange and eye-catching plants you are ever likely to see.

Which makes it all the more inexplicable that these plants are so rarely found in cultivation. Many people who visit our nursery have never even *heard* of a Pachypodium, let alone *seen* one. Well, frankly, we think that's a terrible shame. We hope that this e-book will introduce a few more people to this wonderful genus of plants.

Pachypodiums

an Introduction



Pachypodium geayi

In nature, Pachypodiums are found in only two places in the world – Africa and Madagascar. They are succulents which are adapted to cope with long periods of drought. This explains why Pachypodiums typically have very fat stems, capable of storing large volumes of water. The name ‘Pachypodium’ means ‘thick foot’. Some species are sometimes called Elephant’s Foot plants. Just to confuse matters, one African species, *Pachypodium namaquanum*, is sometimes called the Elephant’s Trunk!

The diversity of form of the Pachypodiums is quite remarkable. Some, such as *Pachypodium lamerei* and *Pachypodium rutenbergianum*, eventually grow into immensely tall ‘trees’. Others, such as *Pachypodium bispinosum*, and *Pachypodium horombense* are low-growing, squat ‘shrubs’.

There are many other notable differences between the species too. Some have long, thin stems, others have short fat ones. Some are spiky, others are smooth. And most striking of all, most Pachypodiums have stunningly beautiful flowers ranging from the spectacular yellow-throated white flowers of *Pachypodium lamerei* to the small, brilliant yellow flowers of *Pachypodium rosulatum* and the delicate pink-striped flowers of *Pachypodium succulentum*.

Marvels of Madagascar

Rare as they are in Britain, one species of Pachypodium (*P. lamerei*, the so-called ‘Madagascar Palm’) has become reasonably widely available in the USA and Australia and it is occasionally seen in the UK too. This is arguably the best “beginner’s Pachypodium” since it has all the desirable characteristics of the genus. And unlike some of its relatives, if it’s kept in a warm, brightly lit spot, it won’t shed its leaves in winter.



Flower of Pachypodium succulentum

When small, *Pachypodium lamerei* looks rather like a fat, spiky barrel cactus topped with a fringe of shiny green leaves. Its stem is armed with ferocious spines arranged in a regular configuration that seems to form a diamond-shaped patterns when viewed from a distance.

In time, the stem of *Pachypodium lamerei* elongates dramatically and, in a few years, it forms a long vertical trunk. At this point it more closely resembles a tree than a cactus - though its trunk still has those impressive spines so it needs to be handled with extreme care!

While *P. lamerei* often develops a single-stemmed trunk, some individuals may develop branching trunks - even while they are still quite small. Given plenty of warmth, light, water and feeding, the plant grows fairly quickly and can attain a height of one or more metres in just a few years. At this size, it may also flower. Its flowers are pure white with a deep yellow centre and look very like the Frangipani (*Plumeria rubra*) flowers used to decorate the heads of Balinese dancing girls. Indeed, this is hardly surprising since Pachypodiums are related to Frangipanis. Both plants belong to the *Apocynaceae* family.



Flower of Pachypodium rosulatum subsp. gracilis



Pachypodium horombense

Big and Beautiful

Pachypodium geayi is another fairly fast growing plant which, just like *P. lamerei*, develops a thick trunk crowned with leaves. In fact, at first sight, you might easily confuse *P. geayi* and *P. lamerei*. The most obvious difference between these species is that *P. geayi* has thinner leaves with a slightly reddish tinge, compared with the broad green leaves of *P. lamerei*. Moreover, the spines of *P. geayi* are somewhat less ferocious than those of *P. lamerei* (though they still need to be treated with great respect – not to mention thick leather gloves when repotting!) and the trunk of *P. geayi* develops a furry covering that gives it a silvery appearance.



Pachypodium lealii subsp. *saundersii*

Pachypodium Quick Reference

The table below shows basic information on the principal species of Pachypodium. The very tall species are shown as ‘trees’ whereas the low-growing species are shown as ‘shrubs’. Those species that fall mid-way between these extremes are shown as ‘shrub/tree’.

The classification of Pachypodiums is a bit confusing. For example, some species such as *Pachypodium rosulatum* are subdivided into several subspecies even though the observable differences between these subspecies may be quite minor. At the other extreme, the subspecies *saundersii* of *Pachypodium lealii* is dramatically different from the ‘pure’ species. *Pachypodium lealii* is quite a tall plant with a fairly thin trunk whereas *Pachypodium lealii* subsp. *saundersii* is a low-growing fat plant.

Some people believe that Pachypodiums should be reclassified with some subspecies being elevated to new species. We won’t enter into the debate over the classification of these plants here. Throughout this e-book, we have stuck to the species and subspecies names used by Gordon Rowley in his book, ‘Pachypodium & Adenium’. In fact, Rowley lists a few more subspecies than are shown in our table.

Species	subspecies	Origin	Flowers	Tree/Shrub
<i>ambongense</i>		Madagascar	white	shrub/tree
<i>baronii</i>		Madagascar	red	shrub
<i>baronii</i>	<i>windsorii</i>	Madagascar	red	shrub
<i>bispinosum</i>		Africa	white/pink	shrub
<i>brevicaule</i>		Madagascar	yellow	shrub
<i>decaryi</i>		Madagascar	white	shrub/tree
<i>densiflorum</i>		Madagascar	yellow	shrub
<i>geayi</i>		Madagascar	white	tree
<i>horombense</i>		Madagascar	yellow	shrub
<i>lamerei</i>		Madagascar	white/yellow	tree
<i>lealii</i>		Africa	white	tree
<i>lealii</i>	<i>saundersii</i>	Africa	white	shrub
<i>namaquanum</i>		Africa	green/purple	tree
<i>rosulatum</i>		Madagascar	yellow	shrub
<i>rosulatum</i>	<i>gracilius</i>	Madagascar	yellow	shrub
<i>rutenbergianum</i>		Madagascar	white	tree
<i>rutenbergianum</i>	<i>meridonale</i>	Madagascar	white/pink	tree
<i>succulentum</i>		Africa	white/pink	shrub

Caring For Pachypodiums

Caring for most Pachypodiums is pretty straightforward. Grow them in an open-structured, well-drained compost. We suggest that you mix your own compost. A good basic recipe would be a standard pot plant compost (e.g. Levington) mixed with equal amounts of sand and coarse grit. You might also want to mix in a small amount of slow-release fertiliser. Alternatively, feed the plants using a liquid fertiliser (e.g. MiracleGro) in summer.

Ideally Pachypodiums should be grown in a warm, sunny spot in the house or greenhouse. Tall species such as *P. lamerei* and *P. geayi* may be grown outside during the summer (say June to September).

Water and feed the plants regularly in summer - but don't let the pot stand in water. The water should drain rapidly through the open-structured compost, wetting the compost throughout without waterlogging it.

In winter, cut back the watering dramatically. Watering once a month will probably be sufficient unless the plants are kept in a hot, bright room in which case more regular watering may be necessary. The compost should be allowed to become quite dry between waterings. Unless given lots of bright light and heat, the plants will be quite dormant in winter. Wet compost will cause their roots and trunk to rot. Don't feed them.

It is normal for many species of Pachypodium to drop their leaves in the dormant season. Some species, such as *Pachypodium lamerei* will keep their leaves if they are kept moderately warm. Other species such as *Pachypodium rutenbergianum* will become totally defoliated and end up looking rather like thorny sticks until they once again burst into leaf in late spring. Once new growth begins, start watering and feeding more frequently. If in doubt, keep the plants slightly on the dry side rather than taking the risk of over-watering before the plants are in active growth.

Incidentally, while many species of Pachypodium don't mind cool temperatures (*Pachypodium lamerei* will tolerate 5 degrees Centigrade or lower for brief periods, *Pachypodium succulentum* can even take very light frosts), they will grow much faster if given lots of heat and light, particularly during the growing season. In our experience, Pachypodiums grown in intense heat and light, either in a greenhouse or under horticultural lighting, may grow at twice the rate or more of plants grown in cool conditions.

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Pachypodium rutenbergianum