

9/22/2008 Lithops-"living stones" - ARID DOME

Some animals hide in holes or under rocks to avoid predators, but *Lithops* plants have figured out how to hide in "plain sight." They are camouflaged to look similar to small round pebbles so animals are less likely to find and eat them. They are sometimes called "living stones" or "flowering stones," and you may have walked right by them in the Arid Dome.

There are many species of *Lithops*, each adapted to a particular rocky area of southern Africa and found nowhere else. The name *Lithops* comes from a combination of two Greek words that mean "stone" and "face." They exist in an amazing variety of colors and patterns. *Lithops* are succulents with a single pair of opposite leaves fused together with a slit in between. There is no real stem; the leaves attach directly to the taproot. Like other succulents, the thick, rounded leaves store water, so the plants can survive months without rain. The small surface area of the leaves also helps minimize water loss. When it is dry for a long period, the plant shrinks down into the sandy soil until it is almost level with the soil. The old leaves eventually dry out and become dry husks that later split open to reveal the new leaves.

A daisy-like flower is produced from between the two leaves and can be yellow or white. The flowers can nearly cover the small leaves. Flowering usually happens in the fall and early winter when rainfall occurs in the native habitat. *Lithops* are pollinated by insects. Later a capsule filled with seeds is produced. It releases a few seeds with each rainfall to increase the chances that some will germinate and become new plants.

These living "pet rocks" can even be grown in your house. They require almost no attention or water, especially in the winter. *Lithops* are adapted to intense sunlight, however, so they will need direct sun if grown as houseplants. There are many sources of these interesting plants in stores or on the internet where cacti and other exotics are sold.

*Lithops* (the same word is used for both singular and plural) are amazing plants. Look for them just inside the Arid Dome entrance that is across from the Show Dome. Some are growing in the ground and others are in pots. They vary from 1-3 inches wide and about 1 inch high. How many can you spot?

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